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Ethnography of Horse Racing Gamblers' Lives. Constructing Biographical Narratives in the Process of Interviewing

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Abstract: In this paper, we analyze the narrative strategies employed by horse racing gamblers in the context of their interactions within interviews. The empirical base consisted of 20 semi-structured interviews conducted with long-term regular gamblers from Warsaw, Poland. First, we state our position in the context of interviews with people aware they may be assessed negatively regarding a very important part of their lives. Second, we discuss how the interlocutors presented their biographies and employed discursive methods of protection against negative interpretation. The research reveals how bettors justify their passion by referring to individual myths about the origins of their interest in gambling. We reveal how bettors consciously employ emotive discursive methods that alleviate the discourse of addiction. Emotions are not presented as triggered by compulsively realized needs but as a result of intellectual passion, pursued by like-minded people joined by a drive for agency.

Barbara Bossak-Herbst is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Sociology at the University of Warsaw. Her interests include urban studies, visual culture, and multispecies relations. To date, she has published two books: *Warszawska enklawa. Świat wyścigów konnych na Służewcu* [Warsaw Enclave. The Social World of Horse Racing at Służewiec] (2020) and *Antropolis. Współczesny Gdańsk w wymiarze symbolicznym* [Antropolis. Contemporary Gdansk in a Symbolic Dimension] (2009). She publishes in *Space and Culture*, *Memory Studies*, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, and *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* journals. She is also the author of a feature-length ethnographic film on the social world of horse racing in Poland *450 Kilos of Dreams* (2018).

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“By talking to you, in a way, I sum up my fifty years at the racetrack” (Adam¹), acknowledged an interviewee who has been regularly betting at the horse racetrack in Warsaw for five decades. All the long-time gamblers we talked to used the social situation of the interview to work through their biography and find the reasons behind their longstanding engagement in racing.

In this paper, in two steps, we analyze the narrative strategies employed by horse racing gamblers in the context of their interactions within interviews. First, we will interpret our social positions in the context of interviews with people aware that a crucial part of their lives may be assessed negatively by society and, therefore, also by the researchers. Second, we will discuss how, during the process of conducting a conversation, the interlocutors presented the elements of their biographies and drew upon various protective discursive methods. These were directed against negative interpretations of those aspects of their lives which, according to them, might be considered trivial, unusual, or even pathological.

The data and field experiences discussed here are part of a bigger study whose major objective was to ethnographically investigate Warsaw's horse racing social world (Bossak-Herbst 2020). Our research was conducted during 2015-2018 at a notable moment. An organizational and financial crisis of horse racing in Poland was accompanied by an outflow of both its audience and horse owners. Alongside that, subsequent attempts were made to implement projects aimed at a functional and spatial transformation of

the historic Służewiec Racetrack, which is the main venue for Polish horse racing.²

In the course of our research, we gathered extensive ethnographic material, including audience observations collected during two racing seasons in Warsaw, along with interviews with the racing audience. We conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with primarily long-time racing players. The older players invariably reported several decades of experience, dating back to the 1950s, 1960s, or 1970s—they were regular gamblers appearing on the Warsaw racetrack on most or even all weekends from April to November. In ethnographic research, long-term contact with a given “social world” (Strauss 1978) is crucial. However, we learned about its participants mainly from conversations with those from this world.

The study of life history has a long tradition in ethnography (Peacock and Holland 1993; Jackson 2002; Falconi and Graber 2019). We were also inspired by biographical research and employed the notion of “biographical work” coined by Anselm Strauss (1984; 1993). Biographical work is a personal endeavor to interpret one's biography in the context of personal identity, choices made, and activities during one's life course. Strauss and other researchers underline that biographical work is conducted by people in difficult circumstances (such as the terminally ill patients researched by Strauss) or in the case of dramatic events and life changes (e.g., in the case of Holocaust survivors, see: Kaźmierska 2008).

² The research consisted of the analysis of documents produced by institutions running horse races in the past and present, the analysis of press materials, as well as ethnographic observations conducted in training center locations, both backstage of the racetrack and at the racetrack, during racing days. A total of 98 interviews (IDI) were conducted with trainers, jockeys, horse owners, the authorities of the Służewiec Racetrack, as well as with regular and occasional racegoers.

¹ All interviewees were assigned pseudonyms after transcription.

In our article, we combine those two traditions to reveal the processes of entering the social world of betting on horse racing under communism. We also reveal the nostalgia for that world that gamblers experience today when the social world underwent a drastic transformation along with the social, economic, and cultural events that took place in Poland after the political changes in the early 1990s. Those are narratives that describe the social world, which we ethnographically researched, but they also consist of biographical work that our interlocutors conducted. And it was precisely the interviews that became the pretext for conducting this work. It challenged our interlocutors to summarize their biography and look for justifications for its course. The need to look for justification resulted from the social stigmatization of the activity that gave meaning to their lives—gambling at the horse races. Our analysis, therefore, not only contributes to research on constructing biographical narratives but also to ethnographic studies on gambling.

Ethnographic Studies on Gambling

Scholars analyze the phenomenon of gambling in sports considering its relationships with capitalism (cf. Young 2010; Nosal 2019; 2023). In the case of horse betting in countries such as Great Britain, those roots are traced back to the turn of the XVII and XVIII centuries (Eisenberg 2020). In the Polish case, the variable relationships between horse gambling and the political and economic systems throughout history were discussed by Barbara Bossak-Herbst (2020). The gamblers whose narratives we analyze began their interest in horse racing during the period of real socialism when the game was at its most developed.

The field of ethnographic studies on gambling had a great founder in Erving Goffman, who breached

“the wall between betting practices in entertainment venues and risk-taking in society at large” (Shalin 2016:25), as well as between mainstream occupations and deviant occupations like professional gamblers (Goffman 1967). Nonetheless, they are scarce. The classic book by Henry Lesieur, *The Chase. Career of the Compulsive Gamblers* documents the relationship between compulsive gambling and crime (1977:15). According to Lesieur (1977:xi), “[c]ompulsive gamblers are those people who through the chase become trapped in a self-enclosed system of options usage and involvement.” “Since a compulsive gambler uses up his financial resources to recover his losses, he is constantly in search of money: he owes money to progressively more people and finds more ways of ‘juggling money’ from person to person” (Lesieur 1977:xiii). As Grills (2004:6) underlines:

Lesieur makes an important distinction between gambling as entertainment and gambling with the expectation to win. In the first case the participant may very well anticipate ‘taking a hit’ as entertainment is expected to cost money. In the latter instance, the instrumentality associated with gambling is financial advantage. When this does not occur and the gambler gambles to get even, the chase begins. Those who attend to long-term gains and losses and become locked in to the longer-term chase are cast as compulsive gamblers.

In our research, differently to Lesieur, we focus on the first type of regular gamblers as they dominate on the sole Warsaw racetrack operating from April to November on weekends.

Social studies in gambling are dominated by theories of deviance and take a social problem perspective (Rosecrance 1990). Even scientists who declare to reject them still use the term. Prus and Grills

(2003:ix) have coined the eponymous term of their book, the “deviant mystique,” to “refer to the allures and fascinations, the anxieties and fears, and disaffections and repulsions that people associate with wrongdoing and morality.” As Prus and Grills (2003) underline, their approach is notably distinct from the standpoints adapted by the moralists, idealists, and structuralists, and they analyze the viewpoints of the people and how they define, interpret, and engage in conjunction with others, yet they adopt the external social definition of gambling, as they state—their material is intended to address instances of anyone (person or group) doing anything that any audience (person or group) might consider deviant in some manner.

The topicality of theories of deviance increased in the wake of online gambling proliferation and the new type of data it generates (Gariban, Kingma, and Zborowska 2013). Although in many countries, “gambling has successfully culturally embedded itself within the normalised and legitimised forms of leisure such as the night-time economy, sports fandom and online forums of socialisation” (Raymen and Smith 2017:381), in contemporary studies, gambling is foremost depicted by scientists as an individual quality (Prus 2004; Volberg 2007), and an activity that “has moved from a moral to a medical framework that within a legalized gambling environment, traces a continuum ranging from non-problematic gambling activities (entertainment, excitement, thrills, etc.) to ‘pathological gambling’” (Cosgrave 2008:88).

Ethnographically informed conceptualizations of horse racing betting are conducted foremostly in reference to Erving Goffman’s works (1967; 1969). However, researchers such as Lesieur (1977), Rosecrance (1986; 1990), Prus (2004), Allen (2006), as

well as Raymen and Smith (2017) revise them within the realm of durable capitalistic history—in the USA, Australia, and the United Kingdom, where access to horse racing is much more abundant than in most other countries. To date, horse betting as “situated, career, fascinated, and persistent instances of activity that can be adequately understood only within a socially constituted life-world” (Prus 2004:9) has not been the subject of study in countries with a discontinued economic history. Specifically, countries where the audience within one generation has been operating in dramatically changed social, economic, and political contexts. One of these countries is Poland. Its political, social, and economic post-communist transformation began in 1990 and changed the organization of horse racing and the social patterns of partaking in it as an audience member.

Our research fills that gap and additionally focuses on an issue that so far has not been treated in much detail—gamblers’ perceptions of transitions in and out of gambling problems (Samuelson, Sundqvist, and Binde 2018). The focus of this paper is narrowed to analyses of how regular racing gamblers from Warsaw display their visits to the racetrack. We will show how their perspectives on their horse betting style of gambling are embraced as positively self-defining activity. Framing this research in one of the deviance theories, such as disavowal theory (Davis 1961) or the concept of techniques of neutralization (Sykes and Matza 1957), would assume that a vague and deviant public picture of horse racing gamblers is a starting point of our interest in them, which is not the case.

In the early literature, gamblers are depicted foremost as adopting temporary gambling identities and as personas separate from everyday life (Huiz-

inga 1949; Caillois 1958; Goffman 1961; 1969). Partly as a result, there has been little discussion about the gamblers' self-conceptions—which also applies to current research highlighting the potential ubiquity of gambling through new technologies (Cassidy, Pisac, and Loussouarn 2013). In this study, we will argue that even the separateness of gambling in terms of time and space from everyday life, as in the case of Polish horse racing until 2019 (when online betting and transmissions from Służewiec Racetrack were launched), should not imply that the decades spent at Służewiec are of minor importance in forming a gambler's biography and self-conception.

Herman (1967) interpreted racetrack gambling by emphasizing the relationship of gambling to occupational life—where gambling offers the opportunity for individuals to make decisions with real consequences, which is often denied to them in their jobs. Concerning self-presentation, gambling can be seen as offering an opportunity to present the identity of someone who can and does make fateful decisions. Furthermore, as someone who does so with confidence, competence, and gameness (Herman 1967). In gambling, the symbolic violence of the market is acted out with the “free-willed' compliance of the subject” (Allen 2006:192).

Disentangling motives that compel people to gamble is one of the major areas of social research in that department. Yet, it also proves to be a hazardous task (Shalin 2016), especially if the researchers assign gamblers to motivational models that ignore the dynamics of their lives. In the case of Polish bettors, the origins of gambling coincide with communist times and a centrally planned economy and the later development of their biographies with democratic and capitalist macro contexts. Inspired by the arguments coined by Goffman (1967) and developed

by Prus (2004), we would like to analyze long-term gambling on horse racing as a form of human endeavor and a part of one's identity.

Interviews as a Tool of Ethnographic Research on the Social World of Gamblers

Conceptualizing interviews as contextualized conversations rather than traditional researcher-dominated interviews (Mattson and Stage 2003), we assume the subjects' horse racing biography becomes especially meaningful within the context of ongoing activity and linguistic interchange.

We expanded our narrative analysis to consider the circumstances, conditions, and goals of the interviewees' accounts (Gubrium and Holstein 2009). To paraphrase the aforementioned authors, we explore the narrative reality dressed up by the storytellers for the relatively young female researchers. Through the interview analysis, we focused on what Holtgraves (1988:78) calls “a self-presentational view of gambling,” not within the gamblers' social world but during the interaction with the researchers. Undoubtedly, an appointed meeting with a hardly known researcher is a prominent type of that kind of opportunity. Despite its anonymization, giving an interview is, from its very nature, a consequential action of providing information and opinions that a researcher will transform into a generalized and public picture of the social world or social category of which the interviewee is a member.

The interview as a social research tool is entangled in several different social, psychological, and ethical contexts (e.g., Kvale 2007; Smith, Staples, and Rapport 2015; Roulston 2019). To elaborate on the methodological aspect of our ethnographic practice, we describe both our and the racegoers' social charac-

teristics. In the next step, we describe the fieldwork part of research among racegoers and appointing the meetings. That will lead to a discussion of the interview as a research tool in the case of interviewing people who are aware that a part of their life that is very important to them may be assessed negatively by society at large. We will then close with a brief characteristic of the interviewees.

At the time of the research, we were female academics with PhDs. We were younger than the interviewees by at least twenty-five years and, in a prominent number of cases, by around forty years. We had no personal connections with the horse racing social world. Before the interviews, we conducted observations at the Służewiec Racetrack to acquire a basic understanding of the game. During the second stage of the field research, we conducted regular participant observations on the racing days. Before we began inviting bettors to participate in the study, we already knew—at least by sight—those who were present in the stands every or almost every weekend, as well as particular circles of gamblers. Initially, we conducted observations together, but later on, we were usually chatting separately in the stands with the players, who also were usually alone or in groups, but rarely in pairs, spent time at the hippodrome. During the fieldwork, we got to know some of them through casual exchanges at the paddock or ticket offices. With time, once they started to recognize us, we let them know we were social anthropologists interested in the history of racing, the rules of the game, as well as their opinions on the state of horse racing in Poland.

For most bettors, our focus on them was unclear or even seemed improperly targeted, as they assumed that research on the horse racing world should focus on the best trainers, riders, and breeders. Therefore,

when explaining our motivations, we referred to the successive reforms of the horse race institutions in Poland and the threat of their liquidation. It was obvious that this was a topic relevant to their lives. Thus, we were defined in two ways—as people recording the last moments of the “dying horse races” or as people who will convey to the decision-makers the views of those who have extensive experience in horse races and gambling. That situation was complex in terms of competence. We considered our interlocutors to be experts on the issues they talked about and us as laypeople (Roulston 2019). Meanwhile, we were aware that the expectations of some racegoers about the influence of researchers on decision-makers were overestimated.

The interview situation extends beyond—and to some extent, begins even before—the interview itself (cf. Brinkmann and Kvale 2014). Scheduling the meetings was not based on establishing a personal relationship with the interlocutors (cf. Josselson 2007). The optimal recruitment strategy, in our case, was to show ourselves on the racetrack as basically external, patient observers who were mildly involved in the game. Convincing potential interviewees to take part in the research was not so much about building personal trust and rapport between the researcher and the interviewee but rather demonstrating our readiness to adopt the image of horse racing and betting culture our interlocutors wanted to convey. Thus, to abandon the aforementioned “deviant mystique” (Prus and Grills 2003).

To the degree that ethnography is invariably methodologically indeterminate, it is practically pre-determined by the researcher as the primary research instrument. “It is the fieldworker who fills the gaps left by the need to interpret methodology and ethical guidelines in situated interactions” (Schmid

2020). Gender and age were issues in the field settings and affected our abilities to build rapport with the gamblers at the racing stands and during the interviews. As Bucerius (2013:690) argues, ethnographers do not necessarily need to avoid an outsider role as “achieving status as an outsider trusted with ‘inside knowledge’ may provide the ethnographer with a different perspective and different data than that potentially afforded by insider status.” As relatively young women, we stood out at the Służewiec Racetrack, so we were sometimes treated indulgently. Our social characteristics also had their advantages during the interviews. Firstly, it seems that in our cultural context, people are more likely to expect to find a sympathetic listener in women. Secondly, our ignorance about the past was assumed because of our age—so inspiring a willingness to explain what racing and the game are like.

We should pay attention to the active role of the interlocutor during the interview, which may become for them an important element in thinking about their lives (see: Kaufmann 2010). Qualitative research methodologists attach great importance to the researcher’s reflectiveness and competence in the field of subtle control throughout the interview (Hammersley and Atkinson 1996; Kvale 2007). At the same time, researchers who work in the broadly understood naturalistic paradigm appreciate the supposed spontaneity of statements during interviews. However, the autobiographical threads analyzed by us are narratives that most of the interlocutors seemed to have thought about for years. As we will show, those who decided to be interviewed perceived that situation as an opportunity not only to present but also to interpret the events of their lives, summarize, and imbue them with positive value.

Longer interviewing during the race day was rarely an option, as potential interlocutors were too busy watching the races and betting on the results. The main challenge revealed itself to reside in the ‘different’ lives racegoers led outside of the racetrack. The separation of racing life from everyday life reflects one of the horse races mottos: “What happens at the racetrack, stays at the racetrack.” Some who initially agreed to meet with one of us soon declined, and others needed weekends to decide on the encounter outside the racetrack, while in the meantime, they chatted with us on weekends at the Służewiec Racetrack.

An interview is a conversation in which both parties pursue their goals, be they psychological, social, or scientific (cf. Kvale 2007). Sometimes those goals may change during the interview, especially for the interlocutors who—while talking about their lives—may realize that they should interpret their life stories as they tell them. It does not happen often that someone is in a situation of talking about their life—especially if that life may be perceived negatively—to a stranger whom they do not intend to know more about in return. Our interlocutors had time to prepare for the conversation and turned out to be very reflexive in their engagement in horse racing betting.

Within the context of ethnographic inquiry, the interview itself may, then, play a crucial role in eliciting information that would otherwise not be discussed in everyday life and conversation. People may become easily analytical about their and others’ experiences in an interview situation. “The interview may be seen to provide a space for the detachment and envisioning of subjectivities at a particular moment in time, and in a particular moment of experience” (Smith and Staples 2015:2).

Interviews create a social situation that is rare in everyday life. A conversation bereft of practical purpose coerces the interviewee to adopt the attitude of an observer toward themselves and strengthens the awareness that one is perceived through the prism of their “here and now” statements. If interlocutors were recruited as participants in a specific social world, then they would realize that they are also its representatives.

Our relatively young age meant that their older age was visible in the social relation of the interview, which turned out conducive to making summaries about their lives. When asked to share his story, one of the interviewees replied: “Very gladly, as I am approaching the end of my days” (Adam). Several interviewees also brought various materials to the interview—mainly photos, but also press clippings—to illustrate what they were talking about and what we were unable to experience. That shows they assumed the position of ‘teachers’ telling us about the old days and their unique biographies.

The situation of an interview between a relatively young woman and an older man, conducted in a cafe, park, or the building of the Faculty of Sociology, also didn't resemble the typical conversations that players had outside the track. Our interviewing strategy with racegoers was neither based on notions of objectivity and detachment nor friendly intimacy. These interviews also did not take the form of dialogues (Oakley 2015) because we did not have similar experiences to the interlocutors. We could say that the interview situations we created in this part of the study were thoroughly artificial. However, precisely for that reason, they offered our interlocutors the space of freedom that cannot be afforded by familiar social situations.

Gambling is simultaneously meaningful to insiders and meaningless to outsiders, as McMillen (2007) argues. In Poland, gambling advertising for horse racing is prohibited. In the Polish public discourse, horse betting, it appears, is treated as serious gambling and is almost always presented in terms of being a morally questionable activity or addiction. Additionally, as public opinion polls show, it is also negatively perceived by society (CBOS 2011), although for years, the scale of social interest in horse racing betting in Poland was, and still is, low and oscillates around 0.5%. It is unlike football betting and online betting, which are growing in popularity (CBOS 2019:154).

Our interlocutors were well aware of that as they have been encountering negative attitudes toward their activity in various situations and social circles. Only after completing all transcriptions, we fully realized how much *a priori* trust our interlocutors needed to assume—in opposition to popular beliefs—to trust that their experience would find careful listeners devoid of judgment. Moreover, they had to convince themselves that talking about ‘their races’ is equally important even outside the track, where they function in other social roles, which are not seldom unaware, as well as in the case of families who were often reluctant regarding their passions.

Elder racegoers at the Warsaw racetrack come from various social circles—from the working class to the intelligentsia, like engineers, university teachers, and journalists. Others live nearby and used to work in the factories surrounding the racetrack. In the People's Republic of Poland and during the transition, several of our interviewees were working in the gray economy. In recent years, the racetrack has been dominated by an audience who comes there

irregularly. Regular players are, almost without exception, decades-old racegoers who number more than a hundred persons (as of 2018).

Origins of Racegoers' Gambling Biographies

Each interview opened a question on how our interlocutors came across horse racing. The question never came as a surprise. Rather, it was expected. Everyone had a long story about how they started gambling on horse races and why they do it to this day. Those two elements—first contact and justification for their further presence at the Służewiec Racetrack—emerged thoroughly in every narration and appeared strictly connected.

Family traditions, parents' work at races, and the spatial proximity of the racetrack meant that coming to the races was described as codetermining circumstances. However, those reasons were never taken as an explanation for the passion for racing. Some stories were accompanied by a memory of a friend who came to the races for the first time with an interlocutor, but "did not get involved." Thus, it is not enough to live next to the racing track, come to horse races, or even successfully bet on them to turn into a regular racegoer. The transition also needs a special life circumstance or predisposition.

Few interviews had initiation in childhood, which entailed a sense of 'eternality' of their experiences and placed those events beyond time and their control. The players' community especially appreciates racegoers who come from families that had some connection with horses before the Second World War, as breeders or owners or cavalrymen. Nevertheless, most racegoers only have their personal myth of origins in which appears at least one of the

following elements—the introductory person, the first, usually unexpected, win, or an event that depicts how, from the very beginning, the Służewiec Racetrack appeared to the interlocutor as a unique place, or at least different from the everyday world.

The introductory person was, in a few cases, the grandfather or father described as, for example, the one who named his dogs after the horses that won the Derby. Another was such a committed gambler that he left his grandson in a bar on the track, where the interlocutor was fed by kind 'aunts' from the hospitality service. Those who did not have such roots emphasized their initiation myth—a win or an anecdotal event from the first visit to the racetrack.

My family didn't have any horse racing experience, but there were echoes of, so to say, the landed gentry's past. As a ten-year-old boy, I persuaded my mother to take me to Służewiec because, in the daily *Express Wieczorny* newspaper, I read that there is the Derby. At the Derby, we were a little late because when we were walking along the road toward the track, there was such a scene—an old man was running toward the races, as racers say, "on the whip," and from the opposite side, from the side of the track, there was a man with a gloomy face and the old man exclaims to him, "What has come?! What has come?" The other answered him: "Mister of the Track," and, as is the case with one of the Bulgakov novels, he was offended for unclear reasons. I remembered Mister of the Track as the first name of the horse, and then, as I grew up, I checked which year it was, and Mister of the Track won the Derby in 1959. [Max]

The winning horse of the 'first derby' appeared several times in the interviews. Its name links personal experiences with the great history of the horse rac-

ing world and allows insiders to identify the year of horse racing initiations.

The first win was a common motive for playing races for many years. That theme is often featured in the biographies of various players as particularly captivating. Typically, all who won during the first visit to the races remember all the related details: race type, stakes, bet type, horse name, and even the exact sum of the winnings: "I hit the triple...those were the 1960s. I bet twenty zlotys, and I still remember the sum of 4936 zlotys that I won" (Mark). One of the interviewees recalls how he came to the races with his father as a seven-year-old boy, and his father asked him to choose the winning horse. The animal won, which resulted in not only the prize money but, foremost, the image of a euphoric father and his colleague.

The two of them embraced each other, the father and his friend, and they jumped and were happy. He gave me eighty zlotys...When we went home, we took a taxi, and we bought all kinds of good things, cookies, everything in the Delicatessen Shop. This is how I started going to horse races. How could I not catch the bug? [David]

A separate type of initiation myth relates to a love for horses, although it does not exclude other motives. One of the older interviewees said, "I guess I was born with a love for horses" (Max). In his case, it was a well-thought-out and mentally well-grounded interpretative frame. Max brought photos to the interview to justify his childhood fascination with horses, which was presented as inherent. A few interviewees took part in horse training sessions in their youth. From 1968, the state company managing the stables in Stuzewiec, due to staff shortages, established an 'amateur' institution. The appropri-

ate ID card enabled young people to groom and ride horses during training and amateur races ("out of passion" and without remuneration). One older man described the time when he was riding horses as the most beautiful period of his life. He has been a gambler for decades, but watching the races also stirs up memories of those emotions.

Many interviewees mentioned how good contacts in the stables provided insider information and constituted an additional source of emotional gratification in the sphere of social connections. Although cheating has evaporated from Polish horse racing with the privatization of horse ownership and training in the 1990s, so the first reason for excitement has diminished somewhat, memories of that are still adding meaning to racegoers' engagement and persistent gambling.

Some interviewees had a very distinctly developed internal interpretive framework for the several decades they have spent visiting the race track that has grown from initial events or motivations. Freedom was inextricably associated with the possibility of making autonomous decisions beyond anyone's control.

In high school, at the age of sixteen, it had already started on a more serious scale. That was in the middle of the 1980s, a really wretched time, right after martial law ended. An apathetic, disheartening time of no prospects, or so it seemed at that time. Stuzewiec was an oasis of freedom. If anybody had any business streak, they would come here, and if they had any opinions, they would pay for them. He was wrong—he lost, he was right—he won. [John]

The sense of freedom also dominates in the original narrative on the origins of passion for horse racing

embodied in the individual story of imprisonment and release.

What is very characteristic in my case, why did I—so to speak—lose myself in these races? Then, it was 1968; after 1967, I got thrown into jail—a detention ward in Białoleka—on March 15th. I got accidentally pulled off the street accused of beating a policeman [during the students' political protests]...My parents bailed me out, they never told me how much they had paid, but there had to be some price. Two months later, around May 11th, I got out, it was probably Saturday, I went home with my father, and in the afternoon, I went to the race-track, and it's the opening of the season. This event attracts loads of people, such is the tradition...It is simply amazing! In the morning, I was still locked up, and in the afternoon, I found myself in the open air, I was released...I believe it was then that I became a regular at the races, practically a regular. I kept coming to the track and never missed a race! It was this contrast between the limited space, the confined room—the jail in Białoleka—and the beautiful open space in Służewiec that attracted me so much. And I think, after all those fifty years, I think if I had wasted my life because of the races, this is all my parents' fault because they pulled me out of jail. [Adam]

The story was so salient and grounded in the man's thoughts that he repeated it four times during the interview. That is an emotional rationale, and it serves the same purpose each time—justifying Adam's long-life attachment to horse racing. Therefore, he had a story prepared in advance, which showed the uniqueness of his biography while presenting a value important also for others—the feeling of freedom.

While describing how the Polish long-time bettors presented their racegoers' biographies in the inter-

view process, it is necessary to include how the origin stories are infused with a sense of uniqueness. The sustaining mechanism of gambling persistence (Rosecrance 1986) binds present routines with a special origin. That kind of romanticized origins of one's life path often has the character of an appeal to fatefulness—so widely described by Goffman (1969)—the unpredictable, risky, or even accidental events that bring high gain. It may be an unexpected win, some specific strong feeling that one remembers for the rest of their life. Classic Goffman's (1967:179-180) concepts seem the most accurate, also for the analysis of autobiographical narrations of regular racegoers in Poland, decades later—a “defensive determinism’ is found in the belief in fate, predestination, and kismet—the notion that the major outcomes regarding oneself are already written down.” Engagement in betting on horse races at the Służewiec Racetrack is presented as not fully voluntary, entailing a work of ‘destiny’ or ‘fate’ to which a person simply surrenders. At the same time, exactly that makes their lives special. Our findings show that fatefulness may be inscribed not only in the discursive presentation of their engagement in gambling as a kind of regular activity but into the origins of interest in the horse races, which took the form of a personal, yet socially patterned, initiation myth.

Emotions That Justify

The topic of emotions appeared spontaneously and constantly during the interviews. “This is, unfortunately, a gamble...But, the strongest emotions appeared when I was still single, then the money was big, and the emotions were big!” (Edward). The emotions the interviewees talk about can be divided into three categories related to betting, the atmosphere of the racetrack, and people who share similar passions, plus a sense of freedom.

Emotions are a fixture of memories—the interviewees emphasized they remember not just the events or wins but the emotions that accompanied them, which they miss and expect to experience again. All interviewees emphasized that the emotional state that remains in their memory for life is the euphoric sense of pride in one's ability to predict the race result. It was of particular importance in the times of the Polish People's Republic, when there were no legal paths to participate in a market economy, real economic contests, and betting pools were extraordinarily high. As Keith Hart (2013:35) writes, "For a large number of people without much money, making bets opens up the chance to participate actively in the money force, not just as a passive bystander." While referring to betting in communist times, regardless of education and occupation, interviewees were drawing attention to the strong feeling of agency. Betting in horse racing was commonly described as an intellectual contest that engages great emotions.

For me, the biggest phenomenon is that I haven't gotten dumb in those 48 years! I am limited, but I believe that thanks to horse racing, I have not gone stupid...It is [betting that is] also something good for the spirit, for the mind. Even after 50 years, I deal with it quite intensively because, in my case, it is a very intense friendship with horse races, and despite everything, I did not get stupid. At races, you play with a great amount of information, you must process this information, search, analyze, analyze, synthesize, collect, et cetera. And all this is done by the old regular racegoers. [Adam]

The above conviction of the value of engagement in betting indicates not only its intellectual but also emotional or even moral value and was mentioned by many. Talking about analytical skills was also

commonly presented as a source of pride. Some bettors said that years of betting prepared them for life in a free market economy that began to emerge in Poland at the end of the 1980s. Everyone mentioned (or elaborated) that betting on horse racing is not a typical gambling game, and a few compared it to the stock exchange: "The game itself is quite difficult because you have to take into account a lot of factors; it is not for someone who comes from the street...However, the analysis is a bit like analyzing stock exchange quotes" (Michael).

Along with the discourse of unique emotions, almost all interviewees used a narrative strategy based on referring to their professionalism. When describing their past, most depicted themselves either as professionals (Rosecrance 1990) or as harmless enthusiasts who had never seriously invested in betting yet enjoyed the emotions related to it. Only two persons described themselves as struggling from time to time with data analysis and losses. Yet, it should be emphasized that none of our interlocutors appeared to be in a neglected state or struggling with everyday life.

Therefore, they presented betting not as an addiction but as a challenging and emotionally stirring, ongoing task that can be professionally performed, provide useful skills, and help racegoers to stay intellectually fit. In the Polish People's Republic, where many aspects of everyone's lives were subjected to state planning and control, it was a rare type of experience. As Allen (2006:193) remarks, "all but the most naïve gambler operates with full cognizance that the house always holds the advantage. Are they those to be read as engaging in a form of self-sabotage, or worse, self-exploitation?" In the case of bettors in a communist country, whose professional freedom was even more restricted than in

democratic and capitalist countries, material losses were not only the price to pay for the only legal way in which one had at least a small chance to gain big money but also the only chance for gaining a sense of agency. "Betting inserts a person into money and markets as an agent who takes and makes them at the same time. There is some satisfaction in that, regardless of profit and loss" (Hart 2013:25). That seems to hold true even more to the people confined in the communist regime.

In the twenty-first century, in the current capitalist reality, Warsaw Służewiec Racetrack (except on big days in the racing calendar) attracts a far smaller audience than in the communist period. At present, regular racegoers spend a well-planned amount of their pensions on the Warsaw track, as well as any gains from previous betting. The low turnout results in small betting pools, and thus winnings are never as spectacular as in the past. As an outcome, even the most accomplished 'working' horse racing bettors cannot regard it as a significant source of income or even an accidental influx of big cash. Thus, their motivations cannot be interpreted from an economic perspective (Rosecrance 1990:348-349). Consequently, continuing a habit of regular visits and direct betting is a personal matter of choice, and determination to act regardless of socio-economic contexts, to experience emotions of agency akin to those of years ago.

The second source of emotions is the unique atmosphere at the Służewiec Racetrack arising from dealing with various people who share a similar passion. For some, the possibility of meeting extraordinary, outstanding people was related to the feeling of freedom, "You know, as a young man, when I first encountered this colorful and distinct world, the world of freedom—and by the way, I've always been crazy about freedom, this world of movie stars

and literature celebrities. I just knew that [Służewiec Racetrack] was the place for me. And I go there quite regularly" (Max).

When talking about the special emotions that result from having a unique, niche knowledge of horses and their breeding, some racegoers underlined the value of being understood by other like-minded people. They underlined how their families could not understand how one could be capable of talking for hours about horse races, "You know, usually, it is so that a real racegoer finds no understanding at home, no, there is no understanding, and running away from a nagging wife is just wonderful" (Max).

In both types of narratives, horse racing forms a social world of unique social opportunities that cannot be found anywhere else. Those outcomes confirm the thesis drawn from another qualitative study by Rosecrance (1986) on off-track horse gamblers, sports bettors, and poker players that revealed that social binding arrangements constitute, in all cases, a salient sustaining mechanism of gambling persistence.

Still, more people were underlining a unique feeling of "being in your own place" that accompanies them at the racetrack and distances their decades-long experience from the changing social and economic contexts. One of the most telling statements was: "I have left so many hours there, so much work, so many emotions, so many relations that there is such a big sentiment, attachment... After so many years, it has become such a second home, a home always associated with horses" (Matthew).

Awareness of the large amount of time spent at the races came through in many statements. It is referred to with the strong sentiment:

They [horse races] mean a lot to me because they make up a part of my life. When you have spent a significant part of your time in your life [at the racetrack], it is also connected with such a nice time that you remember fondly...For me, they are important because of the great time I spent there. I like horses, I like horse races, and I know it, I know what horse races are about. [Henry]

Time spent at Służewiec Racetrack is truly memorable to most of the regular racegoers—some interviewees eagerly recalled the names of horses and riders who won the most important races in past decades, but also the names and nicknames of the best or most colorful gamblers.

The word “freedom” returns in narratives on emotions—as the term describing the affect accompanying horse betting and being among other bettors, which translates in the analyzed narrations into the justification of a long-term attachment to horse racing. Experiencing a bunch of strong positive emotions with a feeling of freedom as the most prominent was widely presented as a justification for their long experience in gambling. Thus, the emotions that are addictive, especially a feeling of agency, not money, in the interlocutors' narratives constitute the basic justification for regular gambling.

There were very few descriptions of such emotions as disappointment, failure, or anger. Most probably, players dominated by such emotions had already withdrawn from gambling at the racetrack. Others probably decided to omit to talk about such emotions. No interviewee stated they regretted their time spent on horse races. The only negative element the interlocutors commonly mentioned was the feeling of nostalgia and even the loss of the atmosphere that accompanied horse racing in com-

munist times. Gamblers stated that horse racing was extremely important because, over time, it became part of their life.

I left so many hours there, so much work, so many emotions, so many relations that there is such a big sentiment, attachment...In the beginning, I just came by, now looked at those nearly empty stands, all those friends were standing there...After so many years, it has become such a second home, a home always associated with horses. [Matthew]

At the same time, referring to emotions allows interlocutors to present themselves as sensitive people, other than the majority, who are unable to understand the gamblers' passion. That aspect of the horse racing experience is hard to convey to people dissociated from gambling. The interviewees' endeavors to highlight the importance of emotions can be interpreted as a protective tool against possible negative assessment, which can be explained as a consequence of the inability of others to understand the emotions of the gamblers. It is a discursive tool that cannot be questioned.

Alleviating the Discourse of Addiction

Few interlocutors spontaneously decided to refer to the discourse of addiction and provided us not only with positive interpretations of their horse racing betting biographies.

Theodor was one of three interviewees who referred directly to the addiction discourse that accompanies the issue of betting on horse races. He did so by talking about his wife's reactions to his passion.

My wife says: “You are a gambler!” I believe that I am not a gambler because a gambler, according to my

definition of gambling, first, is the one who plays beyond his abilities, that is—for example, takes a loan and loses this loan, meaning, he plays beyond his abilities. This is a gambler. Besides, the gambler just can't hold out in his game. When he is at the races, he cannot stand it, he must play. I was in Las Vegas, and there I walked around these different roulette arcades and slot machines and watched...I had money, but I didn't play it even once. [Theodor]

First, the interlocutor had his definition of gambling from which he excluded himself. He also strongly emphasized his analytical skills and the distinctiveness of betting on races from other gambling games. In his words can be noted the emphasis on the feeling of being misunderstood by others, which was also present in other narratives.

Two interviewees were talking openly about gambling addiction. Their narratives were dominated by the futile thread of hope of winning money.

With money, there was hope; it was more than hope; there was hope to win! It was very addictive. You can't call it a gamble because in horse races, it's really hard to lose, but it's definitely a passion, and it's definitely an addiction. It is a kind of addiction, and it is a big addiction. This addiction certainly has an impact on a person, and often, it is probably a negative influence. I am very lucky that this addiction somehow has a positive effect on me. Somehow, I'm happy to be addicted to horse races. [Adam]

The interviewee (a former horse racing journalist) justifies his addiction by locating himself among the professionals who generally profit from the ignorance of the non-regular public. During the interview, this interlocutor often used a strategy of reversing the dominant discourses on horse races

that appear in Polish society. This time, he agreed with the labeling of race-going as an addiction, but unlike the popular opinion, he argued that it was an addiction that was profitable for him. Yet the last one is not the most important in his narration. He discussed the positive aspects of typing and betting several times during the interview by placing three features in the foreground: intellectual stimulation, the feeling of freedom, and the feeling of happiness in his activity. Therefore, when he adopts the label of an addict imposed by society, he redefines it, which further emphasizes the uniqueness of the horse racing world. Nonetheless, in the middle of his story, he also adds, "And as I sometimes think about it, on the one hand, coming to horse racing was a lucky event for me because I am still myself all the time, and on the other hand, an unhappy event because of horse races I did not achieve what I was predisposed to. I did not use my abilities" (Adam).

Only one interlocutor internalized the popular opinion about betting on horse races and spoke more about financial losses, not positive emotions.

Well, I used to come here as a person who bets on races. After that first win, it was different. Well, but when I come... How many years? Forty-six years of visiting the racetrack, I won three seasons, that's all. Failures all the time...I was in New York...I also went to the racetrack there. Well, I had the misfortune that there was a betting point near my house, and I was finishing work earlier, so always on my way home... Instead of bringing home a few thousand dollars—it was in the nineties—I brought a lot less. Because a leopard can't change its spots, I can't change too. [Vincent]

He did not use such terms as gambling or addiction during the interview, but he certainly felt that he

could not resist the game even though he wins very rarely and has lost much betting on horse races. His narrative on the matter shows both resignation and reconciliation with his weaknesses. Yet he also had justification for his engagement in horse racing in his narrative, which was his love for horses that he also breeds.

Conclusion: Biographical Work in the Gamblers' Narratives

Our research was not biographical as we did not conduct classic biographical interviews (Bertaux 1981; Schütze 2012). Yet, in the case of many interviews, the biographical thread—the story of one's life—was a substantive part of the narrative or even a prevailing part. The subject of the interview meant that the interviewees did not talk in detail about other aspects of their lives. That said, in all interviews, there appeared longer or shorter stories about professional work, family life, and social life. Gamblers who took part in the project treated it as another “fateful action” (Goffman 1967:164) that was consequential and might bring either gain (alleviating gambling on horse racing from the negative label) or loss (exposing oneself and their world to negative assessment). All racegoers treated the conversations with us as an opportunity to present a comprehensive interpretation of their biography. That typically began with memories about their beginnings and ended with more or less extensive reflections that summarized their whole life passion. Thus, the “narrative work”—the interactional activity, in particular, “narrative environments” (Gubrium and Holstein 2009)—was purposefully used by gamblers to convey a particular type of biographical narration on their engagement in the game. The significant differences between the wider public and racegoers clearly limited the possibility of building

a sense of the close relationship between them. Yet it enabled racegoers to perform reflexive biographical work during the interviews (Strauss 1984; Kaźmier-ska 2008).

Narrative environments of storytelling become critical for understanding what is at stake for a different and alternative view of analysis that is oriented both to the internal and especially to the external organization of stories (Gubrium and Holstein 2009). We are aware that the biographical narratives of the gamblers we have collected represent an idealized self-image that might be difficult to maintain when they are confronted with individuals who know them well or are adversely disposed toward their dedication to horse racing. Everyone stated that horse racing was extremely important because, over time, it became part of their life and character.

Gamblers perceived their attachment as a holistic activity connected with horse racing, in which the most important aspects were specific knowledge and participation in the social world, whose goals were very different from those of the professional and personal lives of the racegoers. They started their passion at the beginning of their occupational lives in a communist country and continue it to this day as pensioners living under capitalism. The findings of the current study show that when talking about their engagement in racing, bettors scarcely refer to macro-structural changes in Polish society at large.

That finding suggests that gamblers' self-conceptions, not to be mistaken with practices and routines, may be, in many respects, immune to transformations of gambling organizations and cultural contexts. Although their gambling activity was separated from everyday life in physical and social

terms, racegoers do not depict themselves as taking on temporary gambling identities. In their narratives, persistent gambling sprouts from the origins of their interest in the horse racing world. The beginnings of their interest in their narratives turn into individual initiation myths around the origins of the passion possessing properties of “defensive determinism” (Goffman 1967:179), which is important for their justifications for their continuing presence in the stands of the Służewiec Racetrack.

Biographical elements can be observed not only in the construction of the narratives of our interviewees but also in Goffman’s work. Researchers underline that it is well-known that Goffman was a passionate gambler (Shalin 2016; Cosgrave 2020). He not only conducted participant observations in casinos but also, or maybe foremost, an autoethnography, yet not directly disclosed in his texts. Assuming that, his concepts may be interpreted as elucidating not only social performances but also the autobiographical narrations of avid gamblers. The compelling thesis within “Where the Action Is” may not be a romanticized conception of gambling (Cosgrave 2008; Shalin 2016) but also a result of biographical work, which we also found in the narratives of gamblers from the Warsaw horse racetrack.

Our research reveals that emotions are a feature of such narrations along with memories—the interviewees emphasized they remember not only the events but the emotions that accompanied them. The first type of emotions that justify an attachment to horse racing are related to typing and betting on racing. Yet they are not uncontrolled or triggered by spontaneous actions or compulsively realized needs—they were presented as an intellectual passion that evokes strong emotions. The second source of emotions is the unique atmosphere

at the Służewiec Racetrack arising from interactions with people who share a similar passion. The third kind of emotion could be called the fundamental one—a recurrent theme expressing the experiences behind a deep sense of freedom that comes from undertaking the fateful actions of gambling and meeting various people who share that drive.

For our interviewees, horse races gave meaning to their lives, often very individual and unique, because they were unrelated to their family and former professional paths. Moreover, it also fits in the narrative about the uniqueness of racing in Warsaw as a special place in the city with a special social atmosphere that cannot be recreated in any way. Thus, betting at horse races is participating in a unique social reality accessible to a small group that cannot be biographically reduced to gambling. Regarding self-presentation, gambling activity provides an opportunity to present an identity of someone who can and does make fateful decisions and, more importantly, as someone who can do so with confidence, competence, and gameness (Herman 1967:83).

The bettors we talked to presented themselves as original persons with their own unusual way of life. Their biographical work was based on presenting the coherent course of their lives—from almost mythical initiation to the position of a loyal participant in the horse racing social world. At all stages, emotions were the most important factor that drove the narration of the biography. Referring to emotions allowed interlocutors to present themselves as sensitive people, distinct from the majority, who cannot understand the gamblers’ passion. We also interpret their endeavors to highlight the importance of emotions as a protective tool against the possible negative assessment resulting from the omnipresence of the addiction discourse on gambling.

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“I was ashamed, and now I am proud as I finally know how to let go.” How Female Polers Perceive, Experience, and Give Meanings to Their Bodies—An Ethnographic Case Study

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Abstract: Although the popularity of recreational pole dancing continues to gain momentum, its prevailing association with the erotic sphere and resulting stereotypes shape it as a borderline activity. Notably, the way pole dancing is approached and enacted elucidates how bodies, especially female embodiment, are socially constructed and controlled. Thus, to look at that issue from recreational female polers’ perspectives, this article sheds light on how their understandings of the body evolve with their engagement in the leisure activity at hand. That process is analyzed in the context of how women deal with tensions that arise while they navigate between the internalized societal expectations concerning desired femininity and personal agency. Drawing on ethnographic and interview data from pole dance studios in Poland, I discuss how polers’ perspectives on their bodies change from personal and interactional ‘limitations’ to embracing their bodies as interactional partners with whom to achieve their goals. In the process of learning by doing, women get to know their bodies and develop with them a relationship based on trust. Subsequently, growing to understand the bodies as their substantial selves that functionality allows them to achieve the ‘impossible’ as one empowers women. At the same time, I highlight how the process of espousing alternative perceptions of one’s body unfolds under the umbrella of an internalized frame of meanings concerning female embodiment that lures women to fit societal expectations. The interplay between the two sheds light on how female polers navigate toward reclaiming their self-confidence from the clutches of the critical social gaze while negotiating the notion of their bodies. Compelling in that regard is how relying on erotic associations with recreational pole dancing in terms of inciting empowerment through a sexual agency, as some studios do, plays out and factors into female pole dancers’ experiences concerning their leisure activity.

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The popularity of pole dancing as a recreational leisure activity has been growing since the 2000s (Holland 2010; Bahri 2012; Dimler, McFadden, and McHugh 2017; Kim et al. 2023). Still, it is often associated with a female erotic performance in front of a male audience and thus—conceptualized as carrying stigma (see, e.g., Holland 2010; Fennell 2022; Kim et al. 2023) due to objectifying and contributing to an existing “culture of sexism and hypersexualization” (Weaving 2020:525). The controversial status of pole dancing as a recreational activity lies in its origin and extension of exotic dancing rooted in strip clubs’ background, with a vertical metal pole as a prop around which to spin and do tricks. However, despite being embedded in a discourse of the culture of sexism and hypersexualization, the understanding of poling has been transitioning over the past twenty years toward a form of commercial aerobic-like exercise (Whitehead and Kurz 2009; Holland 2010; Donaghue, Kurz, and Whitehead 2011). In 2017, the Global Association of International Sports Federation recognized pole dancing as a professional sport by granting pole sports Observer Status, which brings the International Pole Sports Federation one step closer to becoming an Olympic sport (International Pole Sports Federation 2017; also see Weaving 2020; Fennell

2022). Its surge in popularity is, at least partially, due to “re-inventing” pole dancing as a form of recreational physical activity (fitness pole) and marketing it as such (Whitehead and Kurz 2009), as well as increasing media coverage (as in, for example, *Hustlers*, the movie [from 2019] featuring Jennifer Lopez as poling stripper¹). At the same time, controversies surrounding the notion of pole dancing prevail and are encountered even among those involved in the activity who attempt to set clear-cut boundaries between the recreational activity they undertake and exotic dancing others perform (see, e.g., Whitehead and Kurz 2009), as in, for example, the use of the hashtag #notastripper.² Such ‘othering’ unveils how pole dancing is socially constructed as a deviant activity (see: Prus 1996; 1997; Prus and Grills 2003) and can be seen as an example of how female bodies and sexuality are socially controlled (see, e.g., Holland 2009; 2010; Wojciechowska 2015; Ślęzak 2016). In that sense, it constitutes an offshoot of exploitation dis-

¹ Jennifer Lopez used online video sharing and social media platforms (e.g., YouTube) to document and explain the hard work it takes to perform pole dance moves and to elucidate the physical and health-related benefits of the activity, which could have an impact on further popularization of pole dancing.

² Negotiating the notion of pole dancing among the poling community represents one of the arenas within the social world at hand and, as such, exceeds the scope of this article. Still, as some acknowledged polers come from a stripping background, and the community recognizes how the pole dance is rooted in the sex industry, for the most part, the hashtag is considered inappropriate and insulting.

course embracing women as victims of false consciousness (see: Rambo, Presley, and Mynatt 2006). On the one hand, women in Western cultures are ‘bombarded’ and faced with ideals that, for many, are unrealistic to attain, as well as expectations to conform to the sexy, “slim but shapely” body type (see, e.g., Grogan 2021). As Ariel J. Dimler, Kimberley McFadden, and Tara-Leigh F. McHugh (2017:340) argue, “unsurprisingly, when compared with men, women in Western cultures experience greater body dissatisfaction.” At the same time, when they engage in a recreational activity that some see as a manifestation of raunch culture (Levy 2005), they are depicted as passive agents who have been lured into objectifying themselves (Holland 2010). Internalizing such seemingly contradictory discourses to which they have been exposed may be one of the reasons why many new-to-pole participants in the study did not feel comfortable in their bodies, while others decided to keep poling a secret shared with trusted few. And yet, previous research has shown that women experience pole dancing as empowering, restorative of self-confidence, and allowing them to reclaim their bodies from critical social gaze (see, e.g., Holland 2010; Dimler et al. 2017; Kim et al. 2023)—all that thanks to, among others, female solidarity in class (Holland 2010). Findings from this study corroborate previous results. Additionally, the analysis elucidates how, in the process of learning by doing, female polers give meaning to their bodies as they engage in pole dancing as a recreational leisure activity.

This article aims to reflect on how female polers, who undertake pole classes as a recreational activity, negotiate the meanings they give to their bodies while interacting within internalized sociocultural influences exemplified by critical discourses concerning their embodiment and agency. To meet

that end, I will first elaborate on how one’s engagement in pole dancing is problematized concerning the hypersexualization of female bodies and women’s agency therein. Next, I will briefly reflect on the issue of how one’s embodied self-image can be impacted by critical and controlling social gaze, as well as discuss previous research on recreational pole dancing in terms of the impact it has on polers’ perceptions of themselves. I will then move on to the data and methods section, followed by the research results. Here, I will focus on ‘learning’ one’s body and moving from seeing it as often restricting and shame-inducing to embracing the body as an interactional partner who cooperates and guides. How many polers understand and experience their bodies (and through them) is indicative of the discourses they have internalized. Still, as they progress, they adopt alternative optics and strategies that allow them to negotiate the meaning of their bodies and reclaim their self-confidence from the clutches of the critical social gaze. Thus, engaging in recreational pole dancing will be addressed in terms of self-care strategy. I conclude with reflections on pole dancing body entanglement in stereotypical optics on the activity and how that issue translates into tensions between the internalized structural meaning frameworks and personal agency. The analytical paths I unfold are guided by the premises of the symbolic interactionist perspective.

Literature Review

Borderline Activity & Female Agency: Between Liberation and False Consciousness

One could suggest that when performed in class, pole dance is, to some extent, taken out of context and could be embraced by each poler how

they wish to make meaning of their activity.³ At the same time, as Whitehead and Kurz (2009:229) observe, "it is still an act that is (arguably) inherently 'performative' in a way that certain other forms of exercise (such as lifting weights at a gym or jogging around the park) are not," and because of that—may be seen as objectifying the female body as a commodity to be consumed. In that sense, approaching pole dancing as a performative act connoting the sexual sphere can be seen as a manifestation of the cultural logic (see: Enfield 2000; Machtyl 2013) of interpretation, which relies on stereotypes, and the pole dance activity seems to be 'trapped' in a dialectic of meanings attributed to those who perform. An example would be marketing (and presumably teaching) the activity within the context of female sexuality and agency—based on the assumption that women would easily decode such messages and embrace prospective gains practicing pole dance can provide. That is reflected in Ngairé Donaghue and colleagues' (2011) study, which examined how 15 recreational pole dancing studios in Australia are promoted online. The analysis of the websites of said schools elucidated how some of them trade on erotic associations with the activity when promising empowerment through a sexual agency. As they argue (Donaghue et al. 2011:448), the "self-evident nature of the relationship between confidence/empowerment and sensuality suggests an expectation that women will easily recognize and identify with

the idea that insecurity about their 'sensuality' undermines their confidence." The underlying assumption is that having internalized societal ideals, they will recognize how performing desirable femininity can enhance their positive self-image. Additionally, those promotion strategies convey an inherent premise that women undertaking the activity would like, at some point, to orient their pole dancing skills toward an audience, for example, one's partner. A similar approach to teaching recreational pole dancing as liberating female sexuality is exemplified in Ariel J. Dimler and colleagues' (2017) study aimed at analyzing how exercising pole fitness has an impact on positive body image.

On the one hand, and consistent with the lived experiences of recreational polers (see, e.g., Holland 2010; Dimler et al. 2017; Kim and Kwon 2019; Kim et al. 2023), pole dancing is approached as an outlet of possibilities from which to choose that allow women to resist gendered and embodied expectations and gain a sense of empowerment when having fun (Holland 2010). Interestingly, empowerment seems to be a catch cry of raunch culture (also termed porno chic and striptease culture [McNair 2002]), where women's subjectification relies on their free will and agency concerning embodiment and sexuality, and their power can be seen as the ability to incite desire (Gill 2007; Bahri 2012). Thus, they can agentically choose to follow the path of objectifying themselves to achieve expected outcomes. In that sense, they are "presented as not seeking men's approval but as pleasing themselves, and, in so doing, they 'just happen' to win men's admiration" (Gill 2008:42 as cited in Donaghue et al. 2011:447). As Ngairé Donaghue and colleagues (2011) observe, engaging in recreational pole dancing seems to fit that logic—women choose the activity for their pleasure, yet can also use acquired skills to win (potential) power over

³ Recreational pole dance is not homogenous and can serve as an umbrella term for, for example, fitness pole, art pole, or exotic pole (in the case of the latter, which is associated with strip clubs background, polers usually dance in pleaser shoes and aim for more sensual expression compared to other forms of the activity). At the same time, most of the classes I took were diversified due to the difficulty level (beginner, intermediate, advanced), not by genre per se, and incorporated the elements characteristic for each. When performing a routine, it was up to the participants whether they wished to dance in pleaser shoes or barefoot.

men. Although the pool of choices offered to women by raunch culture seems to challenge the previous dichotomous alternative of embracing agentic sexuality or social respectability (Wojciechowska 2015), their liberation comes across as illusory. First, their free and liberating choices aimed at reclaiming their bodies from the clutches of patriarchal society seem to maintain oppression and practices that secure subordination. Second, for those practices to work, women need to internalize a self-policing (male) gaze. Angela McRobbie's (2009) notion of double entanglement aptly theorizes the issue at hand.

On the other hand, as Jacenta Bahri (2012) observes, viewing recreational pole fitness as empowering is problematic as engaging in such an activity can contribute to the stigmatization of those who pole dance for a living. As Bahri argues, while women who are not strippers are praised for their strength and fitness, those who are—have no choice and are exploited and objectified. Thus, the empowerment of some women comes at the expense of others. Furthermore, recreational polers' achievements can be seen as becoming without becoming. Taking pole dance activity out of its context allows those women to learn (and later use) skills valued in raunch culture that exotic dancers and strippers possess. Still, in the case of the former, they do so behind the closed doors of safe dance studios—without becoming a stripper or exotic dancer (Bahri 2012).

How some discourses problematizing female agency and embodiment approach women's involvement in pole dance activities unveils giving primacy to critical interpretation over voicing the experiences of those under the scrutinizing gaze. Such an approach seems to marginalize their situation by picturing them as passive victims of oppressive culture who often have no other choice than to go with the flow

(as in pole dancing for some instrumental goal, be it earning money or admiration). Carol Rambo and colleagues (2006:217) discuss that problem when addressing how academic discourses frame strippers and exotic dancers according to the competing logic of deviantization and victimization, which reduces them to the socio-semiotic field of their bodies.

In some radical feminist discourses, exotic dancers are passive sex objects who lack agency and unwittingly reinforce traditional patriarchal values with their participation in striptease dancing...If a dancer claims she is not exploited or oppressed, if she expresses job satisfaction or enjoyment, resists oppression, or feels like an exploiter or powerful herself, then she is characterized as a victim of false consciousness—a passive agent and cultural dupe who has internalized her oppression.

The above discussion highlights how pole dancing as a recreational activity can be viewed as a symbol with a context-dependent perspective of meaning, which allows seeing it as a mechanism of cultural memory.⁴ At the same time, and foremost, it aims to examine how the potential readings of the activity that fit diverse social discourses are managed and disseminated, as the discourses at hand have an impact on how women undertaking pole dancing give meanings to their activity, bodies, and choices.

Female Body & the Social Gaze

In the previous section, I highlighted how academic, predominantly feminist discourses embrace the

⁴ Kim and Kwon (2019) argue that due to the absence of strip clubs in Korea, the perspective on pole dancing and its link with the discourse of objectification differs from that set by Western media and literature. That conception is known in Korea, but it did not preclude absorbing the notion of pole dancing primarily as a recreational activity.

issue of the female body and agency therein. As argued, although the notions of personal choice and empowerment seem to navigate some of those approaches, it appears that women's bodies as individual projects are encouraged to be developed along the lines of predefined and, in that sense, 'correct' choices one should make to display oneself to the best (visual) effect (see, e.g., McRobbie 2009). That resonates with how women are taught from an early age about the salience of being physically attractive (Walter 2010)—a message widely spread in the mainstream media. Interestingly, how women are lured into aspiring for the best-embodied versions of themselves has been embraced by some brands who explicitly market their products and brand philosophy as women-friendly by encouraging their clientele to embrace their "real beauty" (e.g., in the case of Dove campaigns). At the same time, the underlying message that *physical beauty is important* stays unaltered. In that sense, bodies are presented as arenas for ongoing improvement—a project that should be carried on, following societal advice about how to create the perfect body (or at least the best physical version of oneself) (McRobbie 2009; Walter 2010). As women are constantly looked at, evaluated, and encouraged to compete concerning their physical appearance, they subsequently learn to internalize that critical social gaze, which can result in constant consciousness of their bodies that should look and act a certain way (see: Dimler et al. 2017).

Expectations and imageries concerning a poling body also make up for a pool of meanings associated with the activity regardless of context. Those demarcate who could/should perform and for whom. One example is *America's Got Talent* TV show, which featured several contestants who presented their pole dance acts. In 2011, Steven Retchless auditioned with a pole dance routine to Katy Perry's song, and

although the audience and fellow judges appreciated his performance, one of the judges, Piers Morgan, buzzed him. The judge's brief comment was: "We all got bodies like that, but the decent thing is to hide them with clothes, you see. I didn't get it."⁵ Although Morgan buzzed every act he performed, Retchless proceeded to the Semifinals. During the Quarterfinals, Morgan commented on the routine again: "I have tried to appreciate this act. There's a reason there are no male pole dancing clubs in America. There's a reason."⁶ Another contestant, Roslyn Mays, who performed on the same TV show with her routine in 2015, was fat-shamed by one of the judges. As Mays explained, "Howard Stern told me that I was too fat to be in this industry and that nobody should ever hire me because I am too big" (Whitehouse 2015). As discussed, that is yet another example of how bodies are observed, evaluated, and socially controlled, also due to objectification and shaming, which should keep them in line (see: McRobbie 2009).

Laura Mulvey (1975) illuminated the concept of gaze in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" when identifying how women are stereotyped in movies where the audience is cast in the role of a heterosexual man. As Samantha Holland (2010) argues, participants in her study of recreational pole dance were not subject to the male gaze as the classes were predominantly all-female, which was the case for many of the projects I refer to in this article. Still, as other studies posit, the concept of gaze surpasses the notion of one person being looked at by another (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009). While one may not be

⁵ See: <https://www.metatube.com/en/videos/64143/Americas-Got-Talent-Steve-Retchless-Pole-Dancer/> (4:03). Retrieved June 28, 2023.

⁶ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYq13IQgoK4> (3:42). Retrieved June 28, 2023.

observed in the technical sense, they nonetheless have internalized the perspective and expectations of the other (see, e.g., Blumer 1969; Goffman 1986; Strauss 1993), who, in that sense, becomes their interactional partner and may impose self-policing (Goffman 1986). It seems problematic in that acting within the self-policing context can contribute to anxiety and shame (Slater and Tiggemann 2002 as cited in Dimler et al. 2017). At the same time, the up-to-date research on recreational pole dancing found that women who pole for leisure purposes embody the activity in terms of the positive impact it has on their self-esteem, also related to their bodies. Additionally, some of those research explicitly focused on how pole dancing classes contributed to polers' positive body image (see, e.g., Holland 2010; Dimler et al. 2017; Kim et al. 2023).

How people are involved in recreational pole dancing concerning their approach to their bodies and the impact it has on their self-image was a prevalent concern of much previous qualitative research on the activity. The seminal study by Samantha Holland (2010) embraces poling in terms of loading one's anxieties around a metal prop. Leisure activities, especially the many forms of dancing, appear as arenas wherein people can express themselves through notions of creativity, agility, strength, and gracefulness. Holland presents pole dancing classes as encapsulating those possibilities and allowing women to develop a sense of empowerment through restoring self-confidence brought about issues from building physical strength to female solidarity and camaraderie. Interestingly, and due to the latter, Holland highlighted how poling turned out to be the first positive experience in doing sports for many participants. Her findings are corroborated by conclusions offered by Ariel J. Dimler and colleagues (2017), who illuminated how pole dancing

fostered body acceptance and appreciation through physical skill development, as well as by insights offered by Jasmyn Kim and colleagues (2023), whose research proved the gravity of female bonding and a sense of belonging in fostering body appreciation and self-acceptance among the study participants. In that vein, Kim and colleagues argue for incorporating physical activities such as pole dancing in health interventions for women for the positive impact it has on their everyday functioning. The present research also undertakes the problem of embodiment and experiencing one's body. Still, although it encapsulates the previously mentioned themes, its goal sways toward how those practicing recreational pole dance give meaning to and interact with their bodies as those change throughout the practice. The said process is negotiated and navigated through internalized narrations concerning their bodies and the activities they undertake. To grasp the participants' notions of *whatness* and *howness* (see an interview with Robert Prus in Kleinknecht 2007), it has been assumed that their actions are embedded in specific situational and interactional contexts and, as such, result from their interpretation of certain phenomena, events, situations, and interactional partners' actions (Blumer 1969; Strauss 1993; Prus 1996; 1997).

Methodological Note

In 2017, a friend asked me whether I would like to join her and two other female peers for a beginner pole dancing course offered in a relatively small studio of four poles, and that is how my adventure with that recreational activity began. During my journey, pole dance became my serious leisure activity (see: Stebbins 1982), and many of those who also poled entered my close interactional circle. I practiced at least two to four times a week, taking

various classes, from those more oriented toward fitness to ones aimed at developing dancing skills. I took part in three pole dancing camps with participants and instructors from Europe, attended six pole classes in the UK, and witnessed a national pole dancing contest. During that time, the studio where I practiced changed location and size, which allowed for a flow of new pole dancing enthusiasts (predominantly female) with whom I shared and exchanged experiences concerning our activity. As a typical one-hour class allows for chatting and assisting peer polers in performing tricks demanding more strength or skills, we cheered one another in our progress. Still, it was not till 2019 that I decided to approach pole dancing as a research problem, inspired by many conversations we had concerning the activity. From the beginning, I informed fellow participants and instructors about my idea, and they welcomed it enthusiastically, encouraging me to share my findings.

Although the researcher’s insider status may raise concerns about shared positionalities, and thus, one’s reflexivity about the interplay between empathy and analysis, not to mention ethical issues (Thurairajah 2019), I attempted to overcome that problem by adopting two research strategies. First, when taking notes following pole classes, I critically approached and examined my analytical concepts through the lens of *emic* and *ethic* notions⁷ (Silver-

⁷ The *emic* approach focuses on local meanings inherent to a studied community, while the *ethic* view relates to analyzing those from an external perspective—independently of local context—to grasp the significance of locally embedded actions that transcend the boundaries of a specific community (Schütz 1976). An example would be a local use of the phrase “pics, or it didn’t happen” to acknowledge and appreciate a fellow poler’s achievements. Instructors initiated that to humorously encourage students to repeat (and thus—master) their success. With time, the expression gained another dimension and function—mocking people who called polers “attention whores” in social media. Thus, acknowledging fellow polers’ achievements in

man 2015). Second, I shared my research results with the participants to see whether my analysis accurately reflected their experiences (Charmaz 2006; also see Dimler et al. 2017). Additionally, being aware of how my experiences and location, as well as interacting with particular, relatively homogeneous groups of participants frequenting one pole dance studio, can have an impact on the data collection and analysis, I also recruited polers from other pole dance schools in the area. Although the poling community has close ties, interviewing women with whom I did not practice before offered some insights into the analytical process. At the same time, my insider status allowed me a better grip on the issues concerning embodied knowledge and experiences (see, e.g., Byczkowska 2009; 2012; Kacperczyk 2012; Konecki 2018). Still, as I did not analyze my poling experiences other than when problematizing how my insider knowledge could have reflected in collecting and interpreting the data obtained during observations and interviews, I refrain in this article from discussing personal views and experiences. My presence in the empirical sections of the paper is visible when I refer to specific situations I observed or, seldom, when I state that my and the research participants’ experiences are alike (e.g., when I explain what it requires to hold on to the pole in an inverted position).

Analytical insights presented in this article are primarily based on my ethnographic study of recreational pole dancing classes in a studio located in central Poland. I collected most of the data between

that way can be seen as a bonding and boundary-setting strategy. Additionally, encouraging others to document and share their achievements seems to be part of a trend of impression management concerning one’s digital self (see, e.g., Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013). Also, posting photographs/films of one’s achievements usually involves an indication (e.g., in the form of a hashtag) of where those were taken, which is one way of advertising a particular studio.

2019 and 2020.⁸ During that time, I have been frequenting diverse classes (fitness and exotic pole) at least twice a week (sometimes more than one class a day) and was explicit about the dual nature of my presence and participation. Additionally, I have been partaking in “open classes” where polers were allowed to practice on their own (an instructor was in the room to help and guide upon request). Due to one person per pole policy, only eight people at once could participate in a given class, and since partaking in each class required prior registration, the composition of groups was not fixed. Still, people who attended were mostly regulars. The majority of polers were female, with only one male participant who practiced regularly, but seldom attended classes I frequented (as he was more advanced than I was). They were between 20 and 50 years of age, although most of them were in their early- to mid-20s. During each class I observed, I had casual conversations with fellow students and instructors (all female) that I approached as conversational interviews (see: Konecki 2000). At the same time, although my perspective shifted from class participant to researcher in class, my involvement in the activity did not differ from that before the research,

⁸ Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related lockdown, I stopped attending pole dancing classes in early 2020 and only conducted interviews via Teams till late 2020. In 2021, many pole dance studios in my proximity experienced economic hardships, including crippling business rates, and many closed down. Thus, although I stayed in touch with fellow polers and instructors, we communicated on a personal basis. Another dreadful event for the poling industry in Poland and other European countries was the attack on Ukraine in 2022—as many of those involved in the industry, both recreational and professional polers, are of Ukrainian descent. Those situational circumstances, along with the fact that the studio where I used to practice had to change location that same year (in 2022), had an impact on my withdrawal from the field. Still, as my initial aim—that I wish to achieve—was to analyze the social world of pole dancing, I resumed the research in mid-2022. As the data I collected thus far in the past months did not reveal new proprieties to the issue of experiencing their bodies by recreational polers, in this article, I mostly rely on the material gathered in the first phase of my field research.

and I did not notice such a change in other polers’ actions or when interacting with me. One thing that changed, though, and was observable once I informed them about my venture, was that peer polers wished to know how the research was unfolding and when I would share my insights, which proved a handful later when I sought to discuss the findings considering their representativeness of participants’ experiences. Following a class, on my way home, or when I was back, I took notes that I later analyzed. In sum, my field notes cover 56 pole dance classes. When referring in this article to data collected during observations, I describe specific situations and interactions I had with fellow polers (e.g., conversational interviews). During such instances, the research participants knew I was collecting data as part of a research project we discussed.

Semi-structured interviews were the second data collection technique. In sum, I conducted 27 interviews with 15 women who practiced pole dancing for at least a year. The participants I approached via snowball sampling were between 23 and 36 years of age. The interviews lasted from one to two hours, and all involved showing me photographs or short films of the participants’ practice (it was the participants’ choice to share that content as I did not ask them to do so⁹). On the one hand, that illustrates

⁹ Sharing photographs and films is part of the community’s culture. Outside the interview context, it is done to, for example, acknowledge others with a new trick, spin, transition from one figure to the next, or show how to perform a specific combo. It is also typical that students share a photograph or a film of somebody else they found on social media with their instructors to learn new tricks during class. Additionally, many polers post their performances on social media, including their failures (as in the case of content on @Polelols). They do so to document and share their progress. At the same time, they are not shy to show others that their journey is wobbly, and their actions motivate fellow polers not to give up. I believe that one of the reasons I was spontaneously entrusted with that content during the interviews was due to my insider status, as sharing photographs and films is what we used to do within the class context. Although during observations, I collected visual ma-

how difficult it may be to discuss embodied practice (see: Byczkowska 2009; Konecki 2015), but it can also be viewed as an exemplification of pride due to having perfected a particular trick, a phenomenon many polers are familiar with. I conducted the interviews at the participants' homes, coffee shops, and, occasionally, in pole dance studios. During the COVID-19 lockdown, I conducted follow-up interviews via Teams with 12 women I recruited earlier to see how they were dealing with the situation in the context of their involvement in pole dancing activity.¹⁰ In each case, the cameras were on, and our encounters were not interfered with. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.¹¹ All participants were given pseudonyms to be anonymized (and data that could have potentially disclosed them, like names or specific locations of the studios they attended, were concealed).

The findings offered in this article are part of a larger project aimed at analyzing the social world of pole dancing in Poland. All data thus far gathered (and presented in this article) have been analyzed according to grounded theory methodology procedures (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Konecki 2000; Charmaz 2006), which entailed, among others, coding, theoretical sampling and constant comparative method, memoing, diagramming, sorting memos

materials in the form of photographs or films (with the consent of the research participants), those did not grasp the interactional exchanges or phenomena discussed in this article and thus are not included here. Also, I did not analyze the materials shown during the interviews other than problematizing how such exchanges are part of the polers' culture.

¹⁰ Experiences related to practicing pole dancing during COVID-19, especially the lockdown period, exceed the scope of the article. Still, it is worth noting that half of the women interviewed back then bought a pole to carry on with their leisure activity at home. They exercised by themselves or with some of their fellow polers and instructors (via Teams or other online collaboration platforms).

¹¹ The interviews were carried out in Polish. For the purpose of this article, I translated the cited utterances into English.

and diagrams toward integration of categories. Following theoretical sampling and constant comparative method, I have been deciding on what data to collect next and where to find them to understand the various dimensions of the studied phenomenon. As the project is ongoing, my findings are not final. At the same time, thus far, data gathered in the past few months have not sparked new proprieties concerning how female recreational pole dancers experience their bodies. Thus, for now, I consider the findings concerning that issue sufficient to share in this paper.¹² For that, the results of my explorations concerning one of the analytical categories—experiencing and negotiating the sense of female recreational pole dancers' embodiment—underpin my discussion and are presented in the subsequent sections of the paper.

Body as an Issue

In the studio where I was practicing, one class followed the next, so partaking in a class that was not the first on the schedule meant entering the main fitness room where the previous class was still on to proceed to the changing room. Once in sportswear, one could stay in the changing room or wait for the next class to start in the main fitness room, where one wall had floor-to-ceiling mirrors. Thus, those exercising were able to watch themselves and those in the fitness room waiting for their class to commence. What I observed on many occasions when waiting in one corner of the fitness room for my class to begin was that several women, especially new to pole dancing, would diminish the number of attempts of performing a trick or spin, or refrain

¹² Ian Dey (1999) challenged the notion of "theoretical saturation" on the count of the term's imprecision and legitimacy. Instead, he opted for "theoretical sufficiency." Similar concerns have been raised by Kathy Charmaz (2006).

from that activity, once they became aware of my or somebody else's presence in the room. Assuming they did not feel comfortable when exposed to gaze, I would return to the changing room to await my class. Such behavior could be interpreted in many ways. Thus, I raised my insight with those same fellow pole dancers to be informed that others' presence in the room intimidated them at first due to how they perceived the performance of their bodies compared to others' skills. One woman explicitly stated she feared being judged. Such perception was also verbalized during interviews. For example, when referring to the beginning of her practice, Anna (26-year-old, poling for 4 years) observed: "I didn't want to come off as some lamer, so I pushed myself. I pushed so hard that I could hardly move my arms the following day." Another participant, 23-year-old Alex, recounts her experiences when re-engaging in the activity following a one-year break from poling:

I tried to be focused on myself, but seeing others doing tricks I've been doing with such ease some months back and looking back at myself struggling to hold on to the pole and being so... clumsy in the worst meaning of the word, I felt simply bad...and I remembered chatting with that gal before the class, telling her what tricks I wanted to do, and I thought, "God, you must look like some phony." [laughs]

When addressing the positive impact of recreational pole dancing on one's self-image, Ariel J. Dimler and colleagues (2017) observed how exercising in front of floor-to-ceiling mirrors allows for noticing the diversity of body sizes and shapes, which can contribute to refocusing one's perception on the body. At the same time, such mirrors could also be viewed as a constant reminder of being watched and, in that sense, constitute an incentive to give

off an impression (Goffman 1959; 1986) aimed at controlling the situation and the anticipated assessment of the other. That suggests women could have internalized the social gaze, and based on the interaction with that 'partner,' they anticipate and attempt to manage judgment. In that case, comparing the functionality of their and fellow polers' bodies made them tangibly aware of the bodies they attempted to control to fit in. One of the participants elaborated on the sociocultural context of that issue.

Alice: I don't know why that is so. I mean... We're used to competing, to be cognizant of our scores. Like, in school, where you're constantly evaluated, and where you know you are compared to others. Yes, I believe that is part of the problem that we fear being judged because we're so used to being judged at all times. My body is like, okay, it is what it is, but the bigger issue was how I had no control over it. It was like a limp bulk. I couldn't control it, it was living its own life, and that was frustrating. So, yes, I mean...

I: You didn't want to be judged?

Alice: Nobody wants that, I guess. [laughs]

I: Did you feel judged in the class [when pole dancing]?

Alice: No, but that's not the point. It's in our heads, like, I didn't want to do the exotic [pole] because other girls were so sexy, and I was not.

I: What do you mean by "sexy?"

Alice: They were moving like wild cats, and I was like a sperm whale.

[32-year-old, poling for a year]

What surfaces here is the issue of experiencing one's body as a 'substance' somehow independent of one's will that requires working with it (and not through it) to fit in observed standards of others' performance through their bodies, which allow for specific embodied expression. In that sense, al-

though referring to one's body in terms of it being "what it is" may be seen as coming to terms with its form rather than accepting and appreciating it; the body's image is foremost relativized to its functionality or the lack thereof. That suggests continuous practice and one's successes in that regard could contribute to 'learning' the body and its possibilities, and thus, empowerment (see, e.g., Holland 2010; Dimler et al. 2017; Kim and Kwon 2019; Kim et al. 2023). Another analytical insight is how the internalized social gaze is an offshoot of acting within the sociocultural context where one is lured into competing with others (Giddens 1991; see also Bauman 2007). Interestingly, although being "used to be judged at all times" has an impact on how one makes meaning of diverse interactional encounters, Samantha Holland (2010) argued how women in her study appreciated pole dancing for its lack of the competitiveness context and the omnipresent ambient of camaraderie giving way to embracing the embodied self on ones' pace (see also Dimler et al. 2017). My findings corroborate Holland's conclusions as women in this study were supportive of one another, but also cognizant of fellow polers' experiences. In that sense, assuming the intersubjectivity of meanings, they approached their peers' situation based on how they would like to be treated and how they interpreted the other's positionality based on their experiences and anxieties. One such example is drawn from how instructors approach new students. Having experience working predominantly with women (and their anxieties) and knowing how their optics on the body when exposed to gaze can hold their progress when poling, many instructors running classes in diverse pole dance studios in the area explicitly revealed that when encountering a new beginner group they take notice of not revealing too much of their muscular and fit bodies, as well as to not push-

ing the student to undress more.¹³ As I was told, they act so to not intimidate or discourage women from poling, which, when interacting with the pole, often accentuates bodily features people may feel insecure about. Conscious of how bodily tissue can look when holding on and pressed against the pole, as in, for example, Scorpio¹⁴ or other inverts, some would intentionally comment on it being natural when the skin rolls once holding on to the pole. On the one hand, their focus on the aesthetic aspect of the poling body may be viewed as yet another exemplification of the controlling social gaze. At the same time, their primary interest is bound to safety issues. As it was explained to me, and what I know from my experience, when inverted on the pole, we hold on to it as long as we have a solid grip and our bodies closely adhere to the prop. If one would slightly release that hold to make the body tissue look a certain way, they might fall (something many instructors have encountered in the class and which is exemplified in comments such as: "Is there any way to make my tummy look good?" "Hold on with that pic, I need to look good first"¹⁵). The same safety concern underlies instructions to point one's toes when on the

¹³ As skin sticks better to the pole than cotton fabric (and thus secures a better grip on the pole), exercising in "skimpy" sportswear is safer and allows for performing more advanced tricks.

¹⁴ In Scorpio, one holds to the pole with the outer part of the calf, the inner part on the thigh, waist, and armpit.

¹⁵ "Pics, or it didn't happen" is a humorous phrase one often hears during a pole dancing class, whose intent is to motivate participants to document (and share) their achievements. Analytically, it can be viewed as an impression management strategy aimed at fostering one's positive self-image thanks to receiving positive social reactions (e.g., in the form of likes). At the same time, as sometimes it takes a group effort to make such a photo (including helping a fellow poler to get on the pole), the strategy at hand is reflective of how specific actions are entangled in the social gaze aimed at controlling an individual. Interestingly, more experienced polers rarely post photographs, focusing instead on sharing short movie formats.

pole as such movement tensions calf muscles and thus secures a better grip.

As illustrated in this section, when embarking on their journey with recreational pole dancing, participants (mostly regardless of their previous involvement in other sports leisure activities) tended to see their bodies in terms of an issue. As they lacked physical practice and awareness, and thus, had difficulties expressing themselves through their bodies, they regarded them as somehow independent of their will and, in that sense—a substance they had to fight with to achieve their end (“I looked in the mirror again and said, ‘You’re going to listen to me! You’re about to start doing what I want to do!’” [Liz-zie, 34-years-old, poling for 3 years]). Having internalized a critical social gaze, many of them leaned toward a disapproving assessment of the functionality of their bodies compared to more experienced fellow polers’ performances and—anticipating shame (Scheff 2003) associated with complying with such an image in the eyes of the other—they attempted to manage impression as an interactional strategy (Goffman 1959; 1986). What surfaces here is that although the internalized social gaze entails the surveillance of how one looks and acts, participants, even if they wished for their bodies to “look good,” did not worry much about being “judged” concerning their physical appearance but rather their physical performance—they did not wish to be deemed incompetent compared to what fellow polers were able to achieve through their bodies. The above finding suggests how the positive assessment of one’s bodily functionality can expand to one’s self-image and is consistent with what Jasmyn Kim and colleagues (2023) discovered among Korean recreational pole dancers. It is also corroborated by Ariel J. Dimler and colleagues (2017:348), who argued that “positive body image programs should

consider the inclusion of activities that focus on the functionality of women’s bodies rather than their appearance.”

In the next section, I will address how becoming more aware of their bodies allowed participants to embrace them as interactional partners cooperating toward achieving their (mutual) end and how they reclaim them from the critical social gaze.

Body as a Resource

Contrary to what may be expected of a pole dancing class (be it more fitness or exotic-oriented), for the most part, it is far from glamorous and sensually enticing. Instead, there are tears, sweat, bruises, and broken skin. Perhaps that is something that can be said about any physical training. Still, the specificity of pole dancing lies in the diversity of skills required to not only hold on to the pole but also transition from one trick to another when performing a routine at least five feet upside down on a metal prop. Thus, those who practice work toward developing a firm grip, muscle strength, flexibility, endurance (in the beginning, also in terms of pain tolerance), and most importantly, the ability to trust themselves. Why do people choose a leisure activity that not only is dangerous but also potentially carries a social stigma? For all whom I interviewed and encountered when poling, pole dancing allowed them to learn more about themselves, which had a positive impact on their self-image and translated to a sense of empowerment (also see Holland 2010; Dimler et al. 2017; Kim and Kwon 2019; Kim et al. 2023).

Mary: When I look back at it, it was like black magic, you know. I had that thought, like, “How come, how can that be possible, how can she hold on, how

does she know she won't fall?" [laughs], and so on. It was like a massive "Wow!" Later, when I started doing some basic inverts, it didn't come easy for me, and I was very disappointed. I lacked the strength and agility to hold on to the pole, and sometimes it required many people to help me get there. It was tough, but, as with everything in life, it passed... So, now, when my gals ask me how I can transition from, for example, Gemini to Brass Monkey without doing an Extended Butterfly, I don't even know what to tell them as it just seems so natural. I mean, I don't think about it anymore. I see a trick, deconstruct it in my head, and just do it, and it makes me so proud! [laughs]

I: How do you know you'll be able to do it?

Mary: I don't [laughs]. I mean... Nice! Good question [laughs]. I think... I think it's partially due to experience, you know. After all, I've been doing that for over four years now. But, at the end of the day, it's about knowing your body, I mean... It's hard to put that into words, but... Okay, last week, like last week, I've been at the gym with my kids, and there was this box you jump on... So the kids wanted me to jump, and I did, although it was fairly high. But, again, I know my body, and I knew I'd do that with ease.

[28-year-old, poling for 4 years]

Although Mary's utterance smoothly passes from struggling to knowing one's body, what happens in between is a process when polers dedicate much time to achieving what they know they have difficulties doing. As I witnessed and experienced, for many, it is a process of setting milestones in terms of tricks they would like to do, and one of their strategies to achieve those goals is getting involved in instrumental physical activities, for example, attending a gym, aimed at building strength needed to meet their end. Interestingly, some participants explicitly illuminated during the conversations we

had how such a strategic and small-steps approach they undertook, which allowed them to achieve their goals, prompted them to extend that strategy to other spheres of their everyday lives, making them more systematic and resilient. For example, on one occasion, when I was waiting with a group of fellow polers for our class to begin, that issue was brought up to a great extent. One of the women, a university student who was to take an exam considered a "killer," recounted some humorous stories about her peers' strategies to pass. When asked about her strategy, she immediately replied that her journey with pole dancing, which she started once enrolled at the University, taught her to take a systematic small-step approach and related long-term planning. Thus, at that time, she was already prepared to take the exam. Her observation prompted other polers to share a similar approach they developed due to practicing pole dancing. How she appreciated and instilled skills she learned in class beyond recreational context is reflected in Alice's utterance addressing why she valued pole dancing.

The very thing that it [pole dancing] is so extremely difficult makes you learn, I mean, GENUINELY learn what it takes to achieve your goals. But, you also learn HOW to do that... Like, for me, poling... it made me so much more patient in diverse spheres [of life]. Like, I think that I finally got what it means to take small steps. I mean, you may be achieving things slower, but you get there, and you know it was thanks to your hard work, and you know you did that, that is the result of your hard work. It definitely goes for sports, but it also goes for life, for work, for relationships, you name it. [32-year-old, poling for a year]

In that sense, recreational pole dancing can be viewed as surpassing the notions of hobby and exercise regime to become a tool allowing women to

manage diverse areas of their lives with confidence that they are capable of achieving their goals (also see Holland 2010; Dimler et al. 2017; Kim et al. 2023). Additionally, such a perceived quality of pole dancing may constitute one of the factors behind valuing bodily functionality—as a result of one’s observable progress achieved due to “hard work” and thus eliciting pride and enhancing the sense of potency (see, e.g., Zimbardo and Leippe 1991).

Being able to carry one’s body weight in the air and witnessing one’s strength, as well as being seen as capable of achieving one’s goals, become a source of pride but also, more importantly, of trust toward one’s body (“It’s funny how I used to think of it [my body] as my enemy. Now I can see how my body and I are one, and how it can guide me if I listen” [Lena, 35-year-old, poling for 4 years]). Interestingly, some participants alluded to getting to know one’s body better once they exercised by themselves. That observation points to how supportive the poling community is in holding up its members, but also suggests that relying on fellow polers’ aid can slow down one’s progress and have an impact on negotiating the sense of one’s body. Accepting or seeking other polers’ assistance often allows one to perform a trick (and document one’s achievement). At the same time, taking a shortcut may inhibit embracing one’s relationship with the body, allowing for developing only façade skills, as Amanda’s utterance suggests.

You finally get that if you lack the strength, you won’t be able to do it, you won’t reach, you won’t pull yourself up, it won’t happen for you, end of story... There are no helping hands assisting you in wrapping around [the pole]. And that’s when you get the drift of how much you know your body, how much communication you can have with it. That’s when

“Oh, help me please, ‘cause I HAVE to do that” ends. No, you don’t have to do anything, but you can start working to be capable. And that’s the hardest part because it requires listening [to] and understanding [your body]. [35-year-old, poling for 4 years]

When ‘learning’ their bodies in the process of a small-steps approach, participants become cognizant of the gravity of listening to their embodiment. One such example is when I was told how, based on understanding their bodily experiences, polers were able to tell what their bodies “needed” (e.g., to push more or refrain [see: Byczkowska 2012; Konecki 2015]). In that sense, in the process of engaging in recreational pole dancing, polers became more aware of their bodies as their interactional partners who guided them toward their goals. Additionally, they also learn to appreciate their partners for what they can do instead of how they look (also see Holland 2020; Dimler et al. 2017; Kim et al. 2023).

Extensive training aimed at developing muscle strength changes how the body looks, especially its upper part, making it visually less compliant with the omnipresent ideal type of a ‘feminine’ woman. I remember having multiple conversations with fellow polers whose photos posted on social media got negative comments due to featuring a fit yet too muscular body for a woman whose shape should resemble a Coca-Cola bottle and not a reversed triangle. That, again, brings us back to the issue of the controlling social gaze. Despite developing a new relationship with their bodies (from experiencing those as a ‘substance’ independent of their will toward a more holistic perception of oneself with bodies as interactional partners), women in the study were not only aware of societal ideals concerning their bodies but they also were reminded of those (see: Donaghue et al. 2011; Dimler et al. 2017). Since

the participants were engaging in discussions concerning how others were perceiving their 'non-ideal' bodies, regardless of pole dancers' opinions on the subject, that exemplifies the effectiveness of social control via critical social gaze (McRobbie 2009; Walter 2010). Together with their anxieties and related beliefs concerning their looks in the eyes of the other, as was also voiced by Alice, who did not find herself "sexy" enough to partake in exotic pole class, that reveals tensions that arise between structure and personal agency when one slightly deviates from what is considered desirable (see: Goffman 1986). In that sense, when negotiating their relationship with their bodies that were changing in the course of their recreational leisure activity, women were navigating within different social discourses (e.g., that of beauty ideals and agency) to fit in. Still, when making meaning of their bodies, the polers in this study prioritized their functionality over their shape, which corroborates the findings presented by Jasmyn Kim and colleagues (2023). Although they did not welcome the change with particular joy, polers embraced their shifting embodiment with a sense of humor, stating that new clothes are easily accessible, whereas skills are something one does not buy but earn. In that sense, although their verbal reaction can be interpreted as underpinned by being aware of 'traditional' female beauty ideals, at the same time, it shows how polers 'chose' to refocus when giving meaning to their bodies from being anxious about their social reception to seeing those as personal resources exemplifying one's hard work, and thus, one's source of pride based on bodily functionality (Dimler et al. 2017).

Perhaps that comes with age, but I don't care so much anymore about my figure. It used to be important to me, but now I think it's of secondary importance. What matters more is that I'm healthy and capable,

yes, capable. Okay, my shoulders are muscular for a woman, and I still get some stinging comments about that, but that's just so silly. Why do you care about my looks? Perhaps you should focus on yourself instead. Can you lift yourself in the air? Can you handle your body weight? I don't think so! I can do that with incredible ease, and the feeling that gives me is something I won't trade for some frail shoulders. What can I say? [laughs] My body—my choice. [Nina, 29-year-old, poling for 5 years]

Nina's utterance captures the tension between societal structure and personal agency and highlights how the latter becomes a matter of choice. The persistence of controlling social gaze, which manifests in the form of "stinging comments," is not neutral for her, as is visible in her narration. At the same time, bodily functionality that she achieved due to personal effort is prioritized over a socially desirable 'feminine' body, as her body—and what *they* can do together—empowers her.¹⁶ Another surfacing insight is how critical social gaze also becomes criticized in terms of rationalizing one's decision to not fit the expected social 'ideal.' That exemplifies how women negotiate the meanings of their bodies when navigating within critical discourses by imposing their interpretative frame, which can be seen as a way of shielding oneself against critical social gaze (Turner and Stets 2005).

I used to think a lot about my body, its imperfections, and how others see them. But, with pole dancing, it somehow changed. People are judgmental, but I be-

¹⁶ Appreciation of their efforts, as well as their sense of belonging to a community that shares a common view on the body, is also exemplified by the community's verbal strategy to embrace multiple bruises they get during practice in terms of "pole kisses." Getting "kisses" from the pole allows polers to approach the prop with affection reflective of their efforts, not the prop's resistance (see also Kim and Kwon 2019).

lieve that is because they feel bad about themselves and wish to drag others down...What changed is that I have learned how to appreciate my body for what it is and what it can do. I do amazing things, something I would never think I would be able to achieve, and yet, here I am [laughs]. I was ashamed, and now I am proud as I finally know how to let go. It's like, I don't think much anymore about how I should dress or behave, I just am. [Kate, 36-year-old, poling for 2 years]

As in the case of Nina, Kate's verbalized experience illuminates how confidence underpinned by perceived bodily functionality gave way to refocusing one's optics on the embodiment, which contributed to reclaiming one's body from the clutches of critical social gaze (McRobbie 2009). In that sense, engaging in recreational pole dancing can be viewed as rewarding in terms of representing a self-care strategy accessible through one's involvement in physical activity that allows for personal growth and achievement, which, in turn, contributes to the arousal of pride (Scheff 1994; also see Dimler et al. 2017). As a result, less focus on how one can be seen may give way to becoming less self-policing and controlling concerning the body, as one knows "how to let go," which, I argue, represents a source of empowerment.

As presented in this section, interacting with the body aimed at pushing past one's physical boundaries gives way to 'learning' its possibilities and 'listening' to its needs, which leads to embracing the body not as a foe but as a partner with whom to meet one's end. The process at hand, when one moves from setting specific goals, through working toward achieving them, to "just" doing, can be approached from the perspective of the conscious competence learning model (from unconscious incompetence, following conscious incompetence, through con-

scious competence, to unconscious competence). One's visible progress underpinned by hard work and the shifting relation with the body can contribute to developing a sense of being both agentic and effective and be an incentive to extend specific strategies of meeting one's end to social contexts other than physical activity. Jasmyn Kim and colleagues (2023) employ Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow to elaborate on body positivity through creative immersion among recreational pole dancers. As they observe (Kim et al. 2023:775), and what is reflected in this study, "Csikszentmihalyi...alludes to 'the joy of working ahead of any extrinsic reward' as the essence of self-discovery through creative expression and emphasizes that engaging in activities that generate a sense of flow has the potential to enhance subjective well-being and mediate personal growth and development." At the same time, focusing on the functionality of the body and taking pride in what one can achieve through it gives way to building self-confidence based on one's relationship with the body. Although polers remain aware of societal ideals and expectations concerning the body, when they praise and opt for bodily functionality over its looks, they (choose to) challenge those in terms of not fitting in. When doing so, they adopt a perspective shared with fellow polers and advocate their choices in terms of exercising agency. At the same time, they highlight pragmatic reasons behind the decisions they make. Acting so exemplifies how they navigate between the societal structure and realizing agency when reclaiming their bodies from the scrutinizing social gaze, which can be seen as self-care.

In the next section, I will reflect on how stereotypical discursive approaches to pole dancing can have an impact on those who engage in poling as a recreational leisure activity.

Body Entangled in Stereotypes

One of the subjects fellow polers often discussed when we were in the studio was how many people from their immediate surroundings associated pole dancing with the erotic sphere. Such a perspective manifested itself, for example, in a stereotypical (predominantly male) belief that a female pole dancer must be physically alluring and 'sexually liberated'—as in the case of a study participant whose partner was congratulated by a male associate once he revealed his girlfriend attended pole dancing classes. He was regarded to be "lucky" as his partner must have been "super hot" and "good in bed." Interestingly, and in line with what Ariel Levy (2005) and Angela McRobbie (2009) observed concerning the Madonna/Whore dichotomy, although some men appreciated pole dancers' (presumable) skills, they, nonetheless, did not wish for women they dated to engage in such an activity—as was the experience of one study participant. Of course, men were not alone in sharing and transmitting stereotypical views on pole dancing, as some of the study participants were told by female acquaintances that it was not a suitable activity for a mother. At the same time, several fellow polers discussed instances when they were asked by female peers how practicing pole dancing contributed to their seduction skills, sexiness, or sexual empowerment, to name a few. Thus, corroborating Ngaire Donaghue and colleagues' findings (2011), the participants' experiences highlight how pole dancing is commonly associated with the erotic sphere and desirable female sexuality. Given how those stereotypes convey beliefs concerning expected looks, attitudes, and behaviors, they can be seen as yet another example of a scrutinizing social gaze aimed at controlling female

bodies and sexuality.¹⁷ At the same time, based on those same clichés, women seem to be lured into decoding pole dancing in terms of activity that can benefit them with particular skills (e.g., seductive), tools (e.g., sexiness), and qualities (e.g., [sexual] confidence) with which to navigate toward empowerment (see: Whitehead and Kurz 2009; Donaghue et al. 2011).

Mindful of how pole dance may be seen, some participants did not disclose their engagement in that recreational activity in some interactional and situational contexts. To keep it secret, they would, for example, not post any information concerning pole dancing or their involvement therein on social media.¹⁸ Other women, guided by internalized societal ideals and stereotypes, as well as anticipating critical gaze, restricted (at least initially) their recreational engagement in pole dancing to 'purely' fitness style, believing they lacked some qualities, such as grace, femininity, or the sense of rhythm to progress in other genres. That is what Anna, a 26-year-old pole dancer practicing for 4 years, narrated when addressing her anxieties concerning taking pole dancing class aimed at practicing dance routines.

Anna: I think I'd like to try that [exotic pole], especially since I love watching all those performances [on

¹⁷ Notably, some verbal actions of recreational pole dancers also displayed the internalized stereotypical ways of thinking about the body. One example would be humorous comments by female polers who expressed their 'dissatisfaction' with witnessing how a male poler proved more apt than they did in performing an exotic pole routine ("Great, a guy moves more gracefully than I do," "Not only is he stronger, he also has so much grace, that's just unfair!"). That highlights how pole dancing can be viewed as a dialectic and borderline activity entangled in stereotypical approaches to the (gendered) body (see: Whitehead and Kurz 2009; Holland 2010; Donaghue et al. 2011).

¹⁸ Such a decision was made, among others, by primary and high school teachers who wanted to avoid assessments of their leisure activity (and the consequences of such) within their professional context.

YouTube], but perhaps that's not my time yet. So, perhaps a bit later... [laughs]

I: How will you know that the time is right?

Anna: I don't know... The truth is that, well, I don't think I'll ever be good at it. First, I have, like, no sense of rhythm, nor such inner femininity that some women fill the room with... Like, I would be like a bull in a china shop.

In line with Anna's narration, another research participant, who had a pole installed at home, told me how she once tried to put together an exotic act, but refrained after a couple of attempts as she felt embarrassed about her performance compared to what she had seen online. Her 'failure' in that regard prompted her to take an exotic pole class for beginners.

Based on their experiences, the surfacing insight is to what extent the stereotypical imageries shape recreational pole dancers' actions. On the one hand, that highlights how having internalized the scrutinizing social gaze and desired 'femininity' may have an impact on personal assessment and intentional withdrawal from certain activities to avoid shame (Goffman 1986; Sheff 2003; Turner and Stets 2005)—the underpinning of which lies in constantly making comparisons, as Alice, one of the quoted study participants observed. Since Anna would like to try another pole dance genre, that, again, reveals the tension between the structure and personal agency. At the same time, although also displeased with how her performance played out compared to her expectations, the latter study participant undertook a different strategy for dealing with tension. Thus, regardless of what could have underpinned how the women acted under the internalized social gaze, the social imageries seem to play a salient role in how they navigate between structure and exer-

cising personal agency. In that light, one could ask how, if in any way, social scripts concerning recreational pole dancing translate to how the activity is embraced by pole dance studios.

Natalie: Actually, my first experience with poling wasn't good, so I wouldn't say it was love at first sight [laughs].

I: Can you tell me more about that?

Natalie: Sure. So, the first class I took, it was like five, probably five years back in X [name of the studio]. So, I was a novice to pole, and I didn't really know what to expect, but [there] it was all about, like, forcing you to be sexy, and... more sexy and seductive, as if you were to make a career of it. So... I really don't like stuff like "use your booty, show more booty," et cetera. Like, okay, for example, we were supposed to touch the pole like a guy. That just sounds... Well, it was totally fake. 'Cause, okay, it's your first time, so you don't know how to stick to that [pole], and now you're expected to put on a show. I mean, I do exotic now, but that thing just wasn't for me.

I: Was it an exotic class?

Natalie: No, it was a regular basic-level class, so... [24-year-old, poling for 3 years]

An issue surfacing from Natalie's utterance concerns how imposing a particular meaning frame on pole dancing classes can have an impact on the students' perspective and involvement in the activity.¹⁹ A similar approach to teaching recreational pole dancing is exemplified in Ariel J. Dimler and colleagues'

¹⁹ Notably, Natalie was not the only participant in the study who was reluctant to exhibit sexually loaded behaviors within the pole dancing class context. Some other women, although held high esteem for skills needed to perform the exotic pole, admitted they did not wish to participate in classes aimed at impression management (see: Goffman 1959), which Natalie referred to as "faking." Of course, due to the character of the genre, the issue at hand is more complex and, as such, exceeds the scope of this article.

(2017) study aimed at analyzing how exercising pole fitness has an impact on positive body image. Here, partaking in a brief performance in front of fellow polers is exemplified as a way to promote and develop self-confidence.

Each pole fitness class culminates in a mandatory "community pole" whereby every participant gets up in front of their peers and shows off what she learned during that class. The women are encouraged to be sexual and sensual in their movements, with one rule of community pole being that you have to "sexy strut" to and from the pole. Many participants discussed how this is often awkward and uncomfortable at first, but it actually helps women develop confidence. Anastasia described the process of learning to be confident in herself and her body, and highlighted that sometimes you have to "fake it till you make it." [Dimler et al. 2017:345]

The above examples of framing recreational pole dancing as erotic loaded can be viewed as reflective of an inherent assumption that prospective polers will be able to culturally deconstruct the pole dancing activity as underpinned by the sexual sphere. At the same time, they are expected to acknowledge that the way they express themselves (be it sensual, emotional, or artistic forms of expression) can be used strategically to meet certain ends (see: Donaghue et al. 2011). The performative dimension of that activity seems problematic for three reasons. First, instantaneously faking sexual bodily expressions may entail the projection of one's imagery of what may be seen as such, which further exposes one to the critical social gaze. Second, confidence built on the appreciation of the other can make one more prone to conformity and social influence (see: Zimbardo and Leippe 1991). Third, it not only legitimizes the critical social gaze but can also re-

strain one from seeking a form of expressing oneself in the spur of the moment, reaching instead for already performed and socially approved frames, which contributes to the perpetuation of the mechanisms of social control, for example, in the context of promoting socially desirable femininity. For that reason, it is worth focusing here on one of the classes (exotic pole) offered in the studio I frequented in terms of how the understanding of the activity was mediated via the way of teaching.

Compared to the fitness pole, which mostly entails a combination of tricks and moves requiring physical strength and flexibility, the exotic pole style is more musical and focused on performing dance routines encompassing aerial tricks, spins, and floor work, including splits or shoulder rolls. Due to quick, dynamic, and smooth moves building up for a routine, many participants discussed how that pole style resembles a cardio workout. At the same time, while the fitness pole allows a variety of ways of transitioning to a specific trick, in the exotic style, any 'shortcomings' or incorrect positioning of the body are immediately visible.

A typical exotic pole class would involve practicing and mastering an original routine that instructors choreographed, which usually lasted some weeks. When showing a routine and its sequence or guiding students to perform a specific move or trick, the pole instructors referred to issues such as the fluidity of movement or maintaining the correct body line. Thus, instead of instructing them how to do something within a narrative framework of their choice, the students were instead factually guided concerning what should be performed in the music. One example of allowing an interpretation of dance moves was encouraging the students to think of an animal and imitate its moves (what

can be seen as a referral to animal flow). As I discussed with fellow polers, such an approach was illuminating in the sense that it allowed for embracing pole dancing in its exotic form as an arena for experimenting with the bodies and seeing how others could interpret and give meaning to their bodily expressions. That is reflected in Carol's view on how the variety of exotic pole dancing moves and the way one choreographs and enacts those reveal the wide spectrum of meanings that surpass those of displaying sexuality.

Carol: I'm thinking, for example, about Andy's act, which was amazing! And the way she performed it was pure perfection! I mean, that was one hundred percent my aesthetics. Like, I adore watching Agnes' routines, and I think she's flawless. But, at the same time, you kind of know what to expect. Whereas in this case [Andy's performance], it obviously was sensual, but you didn't have the feeling it was about that. For me, I felt like she took you to her world, and that was great. And, in fact, what we talked about, here [in the studio], you have the opportunity to learn the moves, but we don't dance the same way. We simply don't, and that's great as we can also learn from one another.

I: Why do you think it's so that we don't dance the same way?

Carol: There're many factors, for sure, including skills and the so-called stage confidence, but I also think, concerning those gals I know better, that we also kind of choose the vibe.

I: Do you think that vibe is constant?

Carol: No, and that's the beauty! [laughs]

[28-year-old, poling for 2 years]

Thus, although performing the same routine, the way people enact embodied expressions could be a factor having an impact on the interpretation (in-

ternal and external) and reception of the act. Realizing that, I argue, can allow for embracing pole dancing in its variety.

As I was told by a pole dancing instructor who also worked in a strip club, exotic dancing, most often equated with exotic pole dancing, can but does not have to be about being "sexy," and if it is about that, then one should be mindful of its whole spectrum. Based on the conversation we had, I highlighted in this section how loading any activity with ready-made meaning, self-evident for those who frame it a certain way, may prove problematic. One of the reasons for that is that recreational pole dancing can be embraced by polers in various ways, and luring them into predefined optics reflective of stereotypes and controlling social gaze may not only hold off giving meaning based on their experiences but also discourage some from undertaking that activity. Indeed, while promoting socially desirable femininity and sexual agency (see, e.g., Donaghue et al. 2011) may be enticing for some, for others, it may prove limiting, for example, in terms of perpetuating stereotypical scripts they wish to avoid. Additionally, narrowing recreational pole dancing down to the erotic sphere and enacting female sexuality seem to rely on the premises similar to those that—via controlling social gaze—lure women into aspiring for the best-embodied versions of themselves and, as shown in this article, underpin their anxieties. In that light, one can ask whether a *fake it till you make it* strategy aimed at allowing one to fit societal expectations and ideals is to be seen as the best way to empower women.

Concluding Remarks

Drawing on ethnographic and interview data, my goal in this article was to shed light on how women

involved in recreational pole dancing perceive, negotiate, and make meaning of their bodies. How they espoused their embodiment throughout that journey was analyzed within the frame of body entanglement in many social discourses, including desired femininity. In a society where female physical attractiveness is emphasized and promoted, practicing recreational pole dancing proved an outlet that allowed women to refocus their relationship with their bodies and empowered them to cultivate a positive self-image based on appreciation for what they can achieve and experience through their bodies. Previous research on pole dancing as a leisure recreational activity argued for beneficial implications of that form of physical exercising, including how participants grow to appreciate the functionality of their bodies over their physical appearance (see, e.g., Holland 2010; Dimler et al. 2017; Kim and Kwon 2019; Kim et al. 2023). This study confirmed that perspective elicited through one’s immersion in pole dancing while cooperating with one’s closest interactional partner—the body. In that sense, the power of pole dancing may lie in allowing the reintegration of the aspects of the self and shift through that mind-body connection the focus of physical esthetics toward self-acceptance and self-appreciation (Dimler et al. 2017; Kim et al. 2023). Additionally, this study offers insights into how becoming self-conscious of one’s embodiment may allow the state of “letting go,” which can translate into lesser engagement in self-policing practices. In that context, progressing in recreational pole dancing may be viewed as a self-care practice (also see Dimler et al. 2017). At the same time, I believe that the same positive effect can be brought about by engaging in other sports activities. Ariel J. Dimler and colleagues (2017) advocated incorporating specific contexts of pole dancing classes into programs to foster positive body image.

Such a potential for pole dancing has been noticed and put into practice by Sheila Kelley, who built a chain of S Factor pole dancing studios. As is indicated on the S Factor official webpage (<https://sfactor.com/>), “Our mission is to create a space where any woman can safely and confidently unfold the story of her own body.” The Netflix documentary, *Strip Down, Rise Up*, features the philosophy and method applied in S Factor studios. The documentary shows the journey of a group of women who face their fears and traumas and embrace themselves anew by espousing their embodied selves. Although the pole dance community finds it problematic, for example, for not undertaking the issue of sex workers’ role in the popularization of the activity at hand, as well as for dancing not for oneself but for Netflix subscribers, which is reflective of the performative character of the activity, the documentary, nonetheless, illuminates how one’s engagement in recreational physical activity can have an impact on one’s self-image. One could question whether a group therapy-like approach adopted in the S Factor method would prove beneficial in the long run. At the same time, the documentary features a variety of how pole dancing studios structure classes and frame the notion of the activity. Based on my research, I argue that allowing students to create and negotiate their interpretation of pole dancing and the meaning of their involvement therein gives way to experimenting not only with the notions of the body but also with and through the body. Whereas framing that activity with ready-made scripts reflective of critical social gaze and luring students into unquestioningly embracing such optics can discourage them from practicing pole dancing.

My findings in this article corroborate conclusions offered in research undertaking a similar subject

of the female body within the pole dancing class context. At the same time, adopting a symbolic interactionist perspective allowed me to grasp how research participants give meaning to the recreational activity they undertake and their actions therein. Based on SI premises, I highlighted how the understanding of their bodies changes over time from 'substance' independent of their will to interactional partners. Part of that process is that being mindful of what they can achieve through their bodies made women in this study reflective of how they were able to meet their goals, which allowed them to utilize those strategies beyond the class context. Acting so gave way to form an even stronger bond with the substantial aspect of self as it made them more cognizant of their abilities and thus—empowered them based on recognizing their achievements. Additionally, when analyzing the process of giving meaning to one's embodiment, my goal was to capture the intervening conditions in the form of the internalized social gaze. That allowed for highlighting how women navigate and deal with tensions between the structure and enacting personal agency, including their agentical choice of bodily functionality over its socially desired looks, as well as picturing recreational pole dancing as a boundary activity. Finally, when drawing on the latter, I advocated how framing recreational pole dancing in a way reflective of stereotypes and scrutinizing social gaze—as some pole dance studios do—may prove counterproductive. My intention was also to suggest that building one's self-confidence based on the performative dimension of undertaken activity to fit societal ideals and expectations may have more in common with social conformity than (genuine) empowerment.

At the same time, my findings are limited to the more fitness approach to pole dancing, and the

research was primarily focused on female participants' experiences. Thus, to illustrate the wide variety and complexity of the social world of pole dancing, as well as its entanglement in many social discourses, future research should consider more nuanced analytical paths. It should undertake the issue of male participants' perspectives and diverse contexts of pole dancing, including its inherent performative dimension.

In sum, this research has extended the literature on how undertaking recreational physical activity can have a positive impact on one's self-image. Specifically, insights shared by participants elucidated how pole dancing is a context whereby women in this study experienced and espoused their bodies as interactional partners with whom to achieve the 'impossible.' Throughout that journey of 'learning' their bodies, women refocused their perspective on the body, which gave way to appreciating its functionality and being proud of what it can achieve. Finally, how they gave meaning to their bodies allowed them to begin reclaiming that part of their selves from the clutches of the controlling social gaze while navigating between the structural framework of social scripts and personal agency.

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"I was ashamed, and now I am proud as I finally know how to let go." How Female Polers Perceive, Experience, and Give Meanings to Their Bodies—An Ethnographic Case Study

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Between Sport and Leisure: Competitive Senior Ballroom Dancing as Serious Leisure

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Abstract: The article examines the motivations, attitudes, and practices of senior ballroom dancing (dancers over 30 years of age). The paper is based on qualitative research (interviews and participant observation) conducted in one Warsaw dancing club and presents senior ballroom dancing as serious leisure as conceptualized by Robert Stebbins, that is, a pursuit of leisure activity that involves long-term commitment and substantial investment in one's development (and thus, significant personal effort) that creates a distinct social world and a strong identification with the chosen activity. Dancing as a serious leisure activity falls somewhere in the middle of the sport-leisure continuum, and senior ballroom dancing is analyzed as a liminal case between these two, oscillating between recreation and competitive approach. The article investigates the process of professionalization of leisure, showing what place dance and competitions occupy in the lives of senior dancers.

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Ballroom dancing is still a rarely interrogated subject, especially in comparison to other sports/artistic occupations (e.g., musicians, ballet dancers). Upon reviewing the literature, I have found only a handful of publications focused primarily on ballroom dancing. Some deal with the history of dance and its evolution from its folk origins into international style (Malnig 1992; Cresswell 2006). Julie Malnig (1992) shows how competitive ballroom dance underwent a process of ennoblement and class elevation—from lower-class origins to salons. She noted that dances such as tango, cha-cha, rumba, and samba were popular among poor people in the less-developed part of the world and were adapted for Western culture through a substantial shift in their manner of execution. It was done mainly by substituting technical excellence (incorporation of ballet technique: elongated lines, straight posture, advanced foot technique) for their emotional and sexual elements. As Joanna Bosse (2007) noted, ballroom dance has been “whitened,” deprived of elements evoking its “colored” origins, desexualized, and civilized (Elias 2000)—it constitutes a more “civilized” manifestation of the romanticized dream about exoticism (cf. the case of orientalism [Said 1977]). Juliet McMains (2009:304) scrutinized the differences between original Latin dances and their Westernized European counterparts in terms of technique and expression and concluded that

[t]he ballroom forms tend to be characterized by a straight spine, movement that is produced through complete transfer of weight from foot to foot, poses and body shapes in which the entire body is extended, extreme toneness throughout the body, foot positions that are clearly articulated, and the prevalence of predetermined steps. Latin American versions of rumba, samba, and salsa utilize a more dynamic and flexible spine, weight shifts propelled by core body movement

often resulting in weight suspended between the feet, flexed knees, and a lower center of gravity, centrality of polyrhythms over body lines, and improvisation closely linked to musical structures.

The subjects that have got a lot of interest among ballroom researchers are also whether ballroom dancing is sport or art (Picart 2006; Marion 2008; Byczkowska-Owczarek 2019) and gender roles in ballroom (Marion 2008; Leib and Bulman 2009; Bosse 2015; Richardson 2016; Harman 2019). On the one hand, researchers noted problems feminist women have with accommodating the rule that men lead and women follow in ballroom dancing, which goes against the major cultural tendency in developed countries such as the USA. On the other hand, they point out that dancing men are frequently accused of effeminacy and ostracized. Some researchers also analyzed the influence of TV programs, such as *Dancing with the Stars*, on the perception and popularity of ballroom dancing, as well as its consequences for dancers (McMains 2010; Marion 2016). Another stream of academic reflection on dancing is the sociology of the body, which focuses on embodiment processes and the meaning of the body for dancers. Dominika Byczkowska (2012), for example, analyzed a dancer’s body as their primary tool that can be sharpened (by training) and polished (by aesthetic work).

To the best of my knowledge, the majority of studies to date have focused on social dancing (Cressey 1932; Nieminen 1998; Bosse 2015; Stevens-Ratchford 2016; Olsson and Heikkinen 2019), some on amateur and professional competitive dancers (Penny 1999; McMains 2006; Marion 2008; 2012; Byczkowska 2012), but only two on pro-am dancers (McMains 2006; Ericksen 2011), and, as far as I know, none on senior competitive ballroom dancers. My aim in this article is to bridge this gap by

reflecting on the experiences and perceptions of Polish senior dancers (over 30 years old). The paper is based on qualitative research (interviews and participant observation) conducted in one Warsaw dancing club, and my goal is to present senior ballroom dancing as a serious leisure, that is, a pursuit of leisure activity that involves a long-term commitment, substantial investment in one's development, and thus, significant personal effort, and that creates a distinct social world and a strong identification with the chosen activity (Stebbins 2009). Senior ballroom dancers provide a liminal case between sport and leisure, they oscillate between a highly competitive and a recreational approach toward dancing, and thus, they constitute an interesting case for investigation—they stand between social and professional dancers, who are usually the object of dance research. In this article, I frame senior ballroom dance as serious leisure and investigate the process of professionalization of leisure, showing what place dance occupies in the lives of senior dancers.

A salient motive for taking up the subject was the fact that for many years, I had been a competitive ballroom dancer, participating in more than 200 competitions, both in Poland (including the Polish Championships) and abroad (including the Blackpool Dance Festival and the United Kingdom Open Championships). I obtained the highest S class in Latin dance and trained in one of Warsaw's dance clubs, where I regularly met senior couples, so I had the opportunity to observe them and interact with them.

(Senior) Ballroom Dancing

Ballroom dancing is “a type of dancing where two people use special steps and movements to do

dances” (Cambridge Dictionary 2023a). To be more specific, it is a form of partner dancing connoted with a set of codified, internationally-recognized dances such as Standard dances (slow waltz, tango, Viennese waltz, slow fox, quickstep) and Latin-American dances (cha-cha, samba, rumba, pasodoble, jive), called International Standard and Latin, respectively, to differentiate them from their US counterparts, American Smooth and Rhythm. Ballroom dancing may also include such popular dances as salsa, mambo, Argentinian tango, and the like. However, this article deals only with dancers performing a set of competitive dances internationally approved and codified by the World Dance Council (WDC) and similar organizations. Ballroom dancing can be divided into social dancing and competition ballroom (frequently called DanceSport). The former is casual and occasional dancing performed by non-specialist dancers primarily for entertainment and to interact/socialize with other people. The latter is a ‘presentational’ form of dancing “focusing on rehearsed, pre-choreographed routines...[that] include extraordinary choreographic virtuosity, as defined by a high degree of physical control over all muscle groups and a concern for visual line and stylized expression” (Bosse 2015:26). This division, however, is too broad and there are many liminal cases. This article deals with one of them—senior dancers—the in-between category, as they compete in competitions yet are not professionals. They dance socially, but their engagement frequently exceeds that of typical social dancers.

Competitive ballroom dancers are divided into amateurs and professionals (PTT 2023). Professionals are those who do dancing as their occupation—they teach, do showcases, et cetera. Amateurs are those who compete in their age and skill level cate-

gories, from beginners to the world level (many top amateur couples present a higher skill level than many professionals). Senior ballroom dancers are amateur dancers over 30 years old divided by age into several categories who compete in their age categories at competitions. There are four senior categories so far in Poland: Senior I (30-39 y.o.), Senior II (40-49 y.o.), Senior III (50-59 y.o.), and Senior IV (60+ y.o.). Amateur couples climb the ladder of dance classes, from Class H, through G, F, E, D, C, B, and A, until they reach the highest possible class—class S. Formally, they are not allowed to make a material profit from dancing, which distinguishes them from professional couples. Amateur couples are divided into age categories (specified by sport ballroom dance regulations), some of which are senior categories.

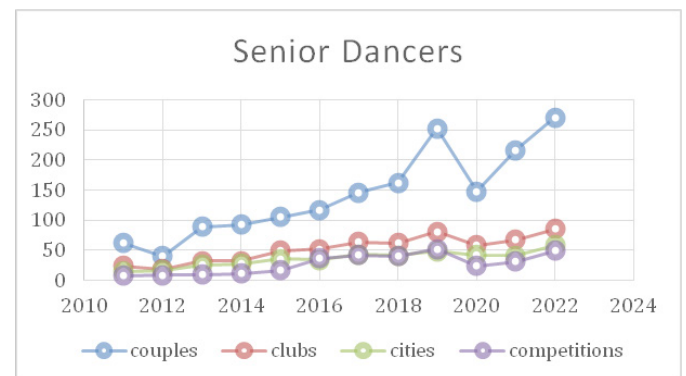
Senior ballroom dancing operates under the same rules as amateur ballroom dancing as a whole and is governed by the specific regulations of the Polish Association of Ballroom Dancing (PTT). Senior dancers are members of dance clubs and compete in national and international ballroom dance tournaments alongside other amateur dancers and professional ones. They dance and score points in the Polish Grand Prix series (GP Senior Dance Open), just like younger couples. The number of senior dancers in Poland has been growing vigorously over the last decade, from circa 50 couples in 2011-2012 to more than 250 in 2022. The number of tournaments for these categories is also increasing, as is the number of competing couples from an increasing number of dancing clubs and cities in Poland (see: Table 1). The only major exception from this tendency was the years 2020 and 2021, in which, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of competing couples and tournaments decreased—it significantly increased in 2022.

Table 1. Senior Ballroom Dancers in Poland (2011-2022)

	couples	clubs	cities	competitions
2011	62	24	15	8
2012	40	19	17	9
2013	89	32	26	10
2014	93	32	28	11
2015	105	49	36	17
2016	117	52	34	37
2017	146	64	43	42
2018	162	62	41	40
2019	252	81	48	52
2020	148	58	42	24
2021	216	67	41	31
2022	270	85	58	49

Source: Self-elaboration based on archive rankings from *Seniordance.pl* (2011-2014) and *taniec.pl* (2015-2022).

Figure 1. Senior Ballroom Dancers in Poland (2011-2022)



Source: Self-elaboration based on archive rankings from *Seniordance.pl* (2011-2014) and *taniec.pl* (2015-2022).

Originally, pairs competed in one senior category, but now (from 2021) there are four of them. Initial-

ly, there were a dozen or so pairs competing; now, there are more than 250 classified in the Grand Prix Senior Dance Open series alone. Since 2010, there has also been the prestigious Professor Marian Wieczysty Cup tournament for senior couples in Nowy Targ, which is the equivalent of the tournament of the same name for younger couples, organized in Cracow since 1974 (the oldest tournament in Poland). Since then, the level of pairs has also noticeably improved, as emphasized by the interviewees themselves.

It's no longer enough to dress well, it's no longer enough to train once a week...it's changing a bit because people are getting better at dancing. If two years ago or earlier it still looked like a very social dance, now the level is getting higher and higher... with people getting more involved and with the focus on development. [Interview_1]

Importantly, the perception of dance in general and the practice of this activity by older people has also changed, reflecting societal and cultural changes (see: Jacyno 2007). As one dancer said in a casual conversation, "20 years ago, they told me I was too old, and now they tell me to train." People's attitudes to life have changed, and there is a growing recognition that it is possible and necessary to do 'something for yourself.' "People are more and more aware that in their 30s or 40s or 50s, they have their needs and can still demand a lot from life" (Interview_5). Previously, doing something at this age outside of work and taking care of the family caused a negative reaction from others, including questioning the family competencies of such a person, "especially for a woman, what kind of mother are you, not at all with your husband, what is that supposed to be at all" (Interview_5).

Dancing with the Stars Effect

The interviewees unanimously state the influence of the TV show *Dancing with the Stars* on the popularization of dance. In the past, dancing was often regarded as something unmanly (cf. Richardson 2016; Jakubowska and Byczkowska-Owczarek 2018), and "someone who dances like that was looked down on a bit, well, maybe he can't do anything else" (Interview_7). On an ad hoc basis, the program caused "a surge of applicants [dancers], so that people started looking for dance schools and learning" (Interview_1). Dance became fashionable, and although the period of peak interest in it had passed, it was more important to change the social reception of dance.

People...stopped being ashamed, stopped being afraid, started to go to some courses, started to do something in that direction, and I think that's how it happened, dancing became "disenchanted" [normalized], it became something that you can go to a course, you can dance, that it's not like it's actually only for anonymous people. [Interview_5]

The program drew attention to dance as an alternative form of activity to others and showed that it could be something interesting and worth doing, also for people over 30 (after all, not all the stars of the program were people under that age). In a way, it promotes active aging, the attitude emphasizing that people, "as they grow older" can "lead productive lives in society and the economy" and "can make flexible choices on the way they spend time over life—in learning, in work, in leisure, and in caregiving" (OECD 1998:84).

Dance began to be perceived positively and associated with an activity accessible to people of all ages.

None of the interviewees encountered a negative reaction to their dancing. They sometimes state that *Dancing with the Stars* has somewhat distorted the image of ballroom dancing, as everything seems easy on screen and the stars reach, in the layman's opinion, a high level of performance in a short time. That is what they see as the reason why interest in dancing has declined somewhat in relation to when the program started. People were discouraged by the seemingly slow rate of their progress. That is why one dancer stated that *Dancing with the Stars* has not led to the growth of the tournament community but has only provided an influx of couples into courses. However, it seems that more people starting to learn to dance means potentially more people finding that they want to take it up more seriously.

The program was part of a whole trend of changes in morals and lifestyles in recent years, a process of continuous expansion of leisure culture (Jacyno 2007). The development of the community was not so much the result of the program's broadcast itself as of the changes taking place in society itself, of which the program was merely a manifestation. Life becomes a trajectory determined, to a greater extent than happened in previous centuries, by individual projects and plans. The individuals impose discipline on themselves, while the importance of external repression declines. There has been an emancipation from traditional lifestyles and a pluralization of lifestyles. The category of choice has become something that many people believe in and act as if it is something taken for granted and universally practiced. That also raises the issue of responsibility. In an individualized society, everyone feels responsible for themselves, and identity becomes a reflexive project. To a greater extent than in the past, individuals create themselves and set goals and ways of achieving them (Giddens 1991). It is this

change that has been crucial to the development of the senior community in Polish ballroom dancing. Dancers broke away from traditional age-assigned roles, from an 'ethic of renunciation' and pessimism in favor of new 'responsibilities,' such as being happy, full of life and dynamic, smiling, optimistic, healthy, and enjoying goods, pleasure, and freedom.

Methodology

Participants in the research were a group of ballroom dancers in the senior category training in one of Warsaw's dance clubs. Nine individual in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the dancers between June 2010 and May 2011. The interviews took place before or after the interviewees' training sessions in the dance hall or places in its immediate vicinity. One interview was conducted with a married couple. I defined the eligible participants according to the criterion of participation in dance tournaments, which I considered to be distinctive, separating dance couples of the senior category from people dancing in a casual rather than serious manner. I interviewed all competitive senior dancers (except for one couple with whom I could not arrange a meeting). All interviews were recorded (informed consent was obtained) and transcribed. All data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach.

The study group consisted of four women and five men aged between 30 and 55. Thus, they fell into the Senior I, II, and III categories. The interviewees have been dancing for four to about 15 years. They all lived in Warsaw and worked mostly as independent workers (businessmen, a dentist, creative managers, and a lawyer). Some do not have children, while others have children at least in their teens. The majority started their 'dance adventure' in high school

or college. One person started taking her first dance steps already in primary school, and two only after college. Some people enrolled in dance classes under the influence of their experiences with weddings, while for others, it was a choice prompted, on the one hand, by the desire to spend their free time on an organized form of activity and, on the other, by the lack of alternatives to dance in their place of residence (most interviewees come from outside Warsaw). The first period of dance activity was often followed by a break due to entering adult life or injuries. Problems with finding a partner also appeared to be a reason for the temporary cessation of dancing. The exceptions are younger people (around 30 years of age), who have been dancing continuously since they started. Returning to dancing was often not a planned strategy: "I never thought I would ever go back to it, I just finished my studies, my adult life started, work, family, and that was it" (Interview_2). In some cases, it was the result of a desire to "do something for myself" or a form of preventive health care, the effect of reflecting on one's lifestyle and its consequences. Years later, there was a certain sentiment and a desire to try to return to something that one once started doing and that gave pleasure.

In addition to the central part of the research, my knowledge was enriched by unstructured interviews and casual conversations with the senior dancers inside and outside the dance studio conducted between 2010 and 2021. I was in occasional contact with some of the dancers throughout that period on the occasion of meetings at tournaments, mutual friends, or weddings.

The auxiliary method of data collection was participant observation during my dance training (covert), during which senior dancers were present at the

same dancehall, and the national tournament for senior couples (overt). Observations were recorded in an observation diary (Atkinson and Hammersley 2007).

The website www.seniordance.pl, which has been in existence since 2010, and the forum that is a part of it (active until 2017 when the senior dance movement became an integral part of the Polish Dance Association scheme), were valuable sources of information about senior dancers in Poland.

A facultative method of data gathering was autoethnography, an approach that seeks to describe and systematically analyze the researcher's personal experience as a member of the studied group to obtain more accurate and reliable data (Anderson 2006; Wall 2008). In this method, a researcher is both the subject and the object of the research that enables exploration of the nuances of the internal world of the interviewees. This research did not apply autoethnography as a fully analytical method but as a tool to reach more 'insider' comprehension of participants' experiences by comparing it with my everyday dancing practices.

Serious Leisure

The senior ballroom dancers' social world can be described by the sociology of leisure perspective introduced by Robert Stebbins (2009), which focuses on the 'more pleasurable' side of an individual's life. Stebbins distinguishes three kinds of leisure activities.

1. Casual leisure, which consists of relatively short-lived pleasurable activities that require little or no special training, such as relaxation (e.g., sitting, walking, or napping), passive leisure activ-

ities (e.g., watching TV, reading books, listening to music), active leisure activities (e.g., games of chance and socializing), and social conversation and sensual stimulation (e.g., sex, eating, drinking [Stebbins 2001]);

2. Project-based leisure, which embraces one-shot, short-term, or infrequent, moderately complex activities that may presuppose planning, effort, and sometimes some skills and knowledge, but do not provide for major development (e.g., music concerts, art festivals, sporting events, religious and national holidays); and
3. Serious leisure, which is a “systematic pursuit of an...activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of its special skills and knowledge” (Stebbins 1992:3) and is an optional leisure activity that people want to engage in for their satisfaction and fulfillment and in which they commit their skills and resources to succeed in it (Stebbins 2009:764). Stebbins divided serious leisure into amateurs (have professional counterparts in art, science, sport or entertainment), hobbyists (have no professional counterparts, e.g., collectors, do-it-yourselfers, participants in non-competitive activities based on certain principles, such as fishing, sports players, and enthusiasts of the “progressive arts” [Stebbins 2001]), and volunteers who “offer uncoerced, altruistic help either formally or informally with no or, at most, token pay and done for the benefit of both other people (beyond the volunteer’s family) and the volunteer” (Stebbins 2009:765).

As senior dancers have their professional counterparts in the form of sport ballroom dancers, they fall into the amateur category of serious leisure. Here,

I would like to show that senior competitive ballroom dancing is a serious leisure, but I also used this theory to structure and organize my results. According to Stebbins (2009:765-766), serious leisure is characterized by (1) only occasional need for full professionalization (such as becoming a certified guide); (2) investment in one’s development, finding a career in the serious leisure role; (3) significant personal effort requiring specific knowledge, training, experience, or skills; (4) durable benefits such as self-improvement, sense of fulfillment, self-expression, regeneration, boosting self-image; (5) a unique ethos and distinct social world in which participants develop their interests; (6) strong identification with their chosen activity.

Rare Need for Full Professionalization

The first characteristic of serious leisure is the rare need for full professionalization in the sense of receiving certificates or professional eligibility. In the case of dance, professionalization would involve becoming a ballroom dance instructor (or if it would be possible taking into account dancers’ age, becoming professional dancers), which only one interviewee did. The decision was driven by an immediate financial need combined with a high demand for dance services. However, that did not become a full-time profession for this person. Among the interviewees, there was no desire or need to formally professionalize their hobby, which constitutes the boundary of serious leisure or leisure at all.

Investment in One’s Development

Although it was not discussed in detail with the interviewees, it must be stated that dancing is not a cheap hobby. To some extent, commitment can be measured by the amount of money spent per

month. Interviewees have to pay a monthly membership fee at a dance club (about 300 PLN [all prices are from 2022]) or a fee for participation in group classes (varies depending on the trainer, the price of the room rental, etc.). In addition, there are fees for individual lessons with an instructor (depending on the coach, between 100-150 PLN per person per hour) and/or the cost of renting a room to train on their own. Costs related to dancewear should also be added. Dancing shoes are something essential and are often already owned by some people at the dance course level. The cost of such shoes varies between 300 and 500 PLN, depending on the company producing the shoes and the sex of the dancer (women's shoes are generally more expensive). It should be remembered that some couples (three out of five interviewed) dance in two dancing styles (Standard and Latin), which doubles the cost associated with outfits and shoes. Professional dancewear is also a considerable one-off expense. Sewing a tailcoat for a standard style costs at least several hundred zlotys and most often more than a thousand; women's dresses or gowns can be even more expensive. In women's partner suits, as well as in men's outfits for the Latin American style, sequins pasted on the material to make it visually more attractive are an additional cost. The costumes of couples at a lower level (H-D classes) are characterized by more modest and, therefore, cheaper costumes, which is set by the relevant regulations. Travel to tournaments (petrol, entrance tickets, etc.), which are also held abroad, is a significant expense. In the case of self-employed people (4 people), the opportunity cost of practicing the hobby can also be added in. Summing up all the expenses, it can be approximated that the average costs oscillate between 500 and 1500 PLN per month, depending on the intensity of training (excluding the cost of outfits and shoes, which once bought can serve for a longer

period), but in practice, the upper limit of expenses may be much higher. Despite all these costs, senior dancing is still much cheaper than its alternative, pro-am dancing, where the senior dancer has to pay for every training session as for a private lesson because one is dancing as one's teacher's partner.

Significant Personal Effort

Interviewees are "aware of the professional standards" of dance, and "all they have accomplished seems mediocre by comparison" (Stebbins 1992:8). One interviewee admits that "the level is still so... low, that it still takes a long time for me to be satisfied, for it all to look so impressive to my eye" (Interview_1). Another interviewee, on the other hand, stated that "here [at the dance hall], when I come, I am kind of an outsider, who kind of came in through a side entrance..." (Interview_4). These dancers are aware of their shortcomings often because they started training at a late age: "you have to train technically, we haven't danced since we were kids, so this technique is, unfortunately, missing" (Interview_4). This awareness, combined with ambition, gives them the motivation to put in significant personal effort, that is, train regularly, gain knowledge and experience, and develop specific skills.

The interviewees train on average four to five times a week, and their training encompasses various forms. These include: (a) group classes, during which general issues are discussed and practiced by the whole group under the supervision of a coach (8 people); (b) individual lessons taken by a couple or one person from a couple with professional, sports-oriented coaches (7 people); (c) individual work, including the practical implementation of the coach's comments into specific elements of choreog-

raphy (8 people); and (d) practice sessions involving performing to music (4 people). Interviewees dance from approximately six to about 15 hours per week, not counting travel time to the dance hall. The intensity of training depends on workload and tournaments, before which the interviewees generally try to put in more effort. All those efforts are channeled into progressing in the quality of dance, but also in the class hierarchy (from preparatory classes to S class in both styles separately). In other words, in making a leisure career, that is, a “patterned series of adjustments made by the individual...[which] is typically considered in terms of movement up or down between positions differentiated by their rank in some formal or informal hierarchy of prestige” (Becker 1952:470 as cited in Stebbins 1970:32).

Long-Term Benefits

Dance was identified by the interviewees as a source of many long-term benefits. The first noted by most interviewees is staying healthy and fit and feeling great about it, reinforced by comparison with friends of a similar age. “I feel young and fit, and there are a lot of friends my age who feel such mums and complain so much” (Interview_5) or: “female friends my age complain that they have sciatica, they have back pain, they don’t have the strength, yes, I don’t have any pain, I’m full of strength, and I train... whereas they don’t, they are making themselves into grandmothers, bent and gnarled, and waiting for retirement... lack of movement, monotonousness, and grayness of life” (Interview_2). Dancing gives the dancers a sense of fulfillment in a role that is different from their daily family or work role, allows them to feel young and confident, and gives them a sense of greater resilience in the face of stress and a “joie de vivre” that “emanates outwards” (Interview_7) and that other people can pick

up on. That makes dancers admired, for example, at tournaments, but also in the workplace. Dancing provides more “self-confidence, such physical confidence, such awareness of one’s body, of how one looks, for example, I have no problems with public speaking” (Interview_6).

According to the interviewees, dance develops a sense of one’s corporeality and helps to improve body language, thus making messages transmitted through the body more legible. It helps to express oneself and one’s emotions, thus serving the purpose of opening up to people, as it is generally intended (cf. Byczkowska 2012:224-272). The fact of presenting movement to other people enhances the process of self-discovery. It helps to define one’s identity related to gendered roles: “dance teaches men masculinity and women femininity, and it also emphasizes, as it were, this masculine and feminine element” (Interview_6). The clear gender division of roles is a distinctive feature of ballroom dancing, as becoming a ballroom dancer is primarily “about becoming gendered” (Bosse 2015:95). This characteristic of dance helps some interviewees to feel more fully female or male in a world that blurs such divisions. It offers clear gender models with leading males and following females who differ in body language, attire, expressions, and dancing roles.

Serious leisure is undertaken to make life more attractive; it is an activity that makes life positive and cleanses it of the negative. Interviewees likened its effect to ridding the body of “toxins” in a manner that did not have adverse side effects (as opposed to, for example, through aggression). Interviewees often emphasize that in addition to their physical health, their mental health is very important to them. Dancing allows them to get away from work, from all their everyday problems, thus giving them

a feeling of freedom and psychological comfort. It is a defense against being fully involved in only one sphere of life. Dancers place themselves in opposition to people who devote themselves only to work and do not engage in any additional activities. Dancing gives the person a certain psychological advantage, the feeling that one is doing something different, something for oneself, which allows one to build a certain 'healthy' distance from the problems present in other areas of life. It allows one to detach oneself from other activities, as one has to concentrate on training, to forget about other things that are part of the 'gray reality.' Dancing allows dancers to build their separate worlds, qualitatively different from the external ones. The dance hall becomes a world of possibilities, freedom, and self-realization. It seems that the world outside of dance and the world of dance are disconnected sets: "actually, they are two different worlds, dance for me and everything else, there is no connection on any level" (Interview_2). When one is in the dance hall, there is only training; when one goes to a tournament, other things are put aside, so that dance becomes a kind of sphere of the sacred.

Unique Ethos, Distinct Social World

Social worlds produce broadly defined "groups" that have "shared commitments to certain activities, sharing resources of many kinds to achieve their goals, and building shared ideologies about how to go about their business" (Clarke 1991:131 as cited in Kacperczyk 2016:32). The social world takes place in specific temporal and spatial locations and has "its own ways of acting, talking, and thinking. It has its own vocabulary, its own activities and interests, its own conception of what is significant in life, and—to a certain extent—its own scheme of life" (Cressey 1932:31). Social worlds

shape the basis of collective actions by generating the shared perspectives and worldviews and are cultural areas whose boundaries are defined "by the limits of effective communication" (Shibutani 1955:566). In any social world, there are special norms of behavior, a set of values, a particular ladder of prestige, and distinctive career lines. The social world, then, is a planned order that serves as a stage on which each participant seeks to carve out a career and maintain and elevate their status (Shibutani 1955:567). It also creates and maintains specific group ethos.

It is difficult to say how unique the ethos, "the manners, customs, and institutions that embody the characteristic spirit of a culture" (McCrae 2009:208) and "the fundamental character or spirit of a culture [that] connects individuals to a group... expresses a particular group's values and ideology in a way that creates an emotional connection" (Kezar 2007:13), of senior dancers is, as they 'inherit' many habits, behaviors, and beliefs from dancers in the sports category. They share their primary activity: dancing and their social world is centered around the dancing club in which they train on an everyday basis and competitions that are opportunities to meet people and achieve the primary goal of competitive dancing: outcompete other couples and reach the highest possible dancing class. In the dance hall, they are not distinguished by anything special (except perhaps their age). Their costumes often do not differ from those of younger dancers (e.g., black tight turtlenecks and specially sewn training skirts made with elastic, stretchy fabrics), they wear the same kind of footwear, warm up, clean dirt off the soles of their shoes with a wire brush. They train in front of mirrors while working on their own. At tournaments, they go out on the dance floor holding hands, bow to the audience af-

ter the dance, and warm up before the tournament at a so-called “dance floor rehearsal.” In general, that is the ethos of the ballroom dancer. In this paper, I have no room to thoroughly discuss all the details of senior dancers’ ethos—more information about younger ballroom dancers with whom senior dancers share many qualities in that regard can be found in Dominika Byczkowska’s (2012) book *Ciało w tańcu* [*Body in Dance*]. The ‘earlier-born’ dancers (the term used by the interviewees themselves) have created their social world, which, however, manifests itself mainly at tournaments and in the sphere of indirect contact. Most often, they do not maintain a close relationship with younger dancers: “It’s hard for me to expect people who are 20 years younger than me to want to have a close relationship with me, or for me to become close with them, [as] I don’t have much in common with them” (Interview_2). However, interviewees found it hard to form close relationships even with older dancers in the club. Making closer contact with them in the dance hall is hampered by the different training times. Rarely do older couples, dependent on work, family, and other commitments, meet in the training room. One interviewee also stated that an additional impediment to forming close bonds is that there is less openness to contact with people who are different regardless of their age (Interview_2). She mentions that everyone has their life, their personal world, and different experiences. Another interviewee notes that “everyone thinks about themselves, that’s how I think every couple thinks about themselves...every couple works for themselves” (Interview_1). Due to the limited time available for training, dancers want to make the most of every minute in the training room; hence, there is little opportunity to deepen relationships with other dancers. The sphere of integration becomes mainly tournaments.

For the interviewees, work and dance are separate spheres of experience. Four interviewees work full-time in large corporations, three are freelancers, and one runs his business. For those working full-time, work and dance do not overlap either temporally or spatially; where work ends, dance begins. Sometimes, when there is an opportunity, they may rearrange their work schedule so that they can be at the group classes, which have a fixed time of day: “What can be moved is moved” (Interview_3). It is, therefore, typical to switch shifts at work and reschedule whatever else they can. The interviewees schedule their training together, often trying to schedule it in such a way that there is time for various forms of training during the week (e.g., time for individual lessons, group activities, or practices). Freelancers are able to shape their working day with more freedom and, therefore, have more flexibility. Work is ‘integrated’ into training, but for some interviewees, it is also an important constraint, as income in their occupation depends on the amount of work and time they invest, setting limits on time for dancing. Work has to come first, as it is what finances dance, but dance is also a highly valued sphere of life that defines time disposition strategies.

Strong Identification with Chosen Activity

Everything that has already been written indicates that senior ballroom dancers identify with the norms and patterns of behavior adopted in ballroom dancing in general. Dance has become part of dancers’ identity, which Zbigniew Bokszański (1989:12 [trans. MF]) defined as “the set of perceptions, judgments, and beliefs that the individual constructs about oneself.” Dance became one possible definition of the self. The interviewees had permanently internalized the values that this type

of activity entails. The study showed a proportional relationship between the level of identification with the values typical of senior dancers and the amount of experience in dance. To some extent, the interviewees feel they are members of the “dance family” (the interviewees’ term), manifesting behaviors and ways of valuing and thinking that are characteristic of it. For example, they take a holiday to go to a training camp instead of a sunny beach, or they prefer to come to training rather than go to the cinema. That does not always entail a strong declaration of being a dancer, as the interviewees define themselves more by what they do than by who they are or what they want to be called. Dancing itself becomes dominant rather than defining themselves as ‘dancers.’

All this demonstrates that, in the case of the described group, dancing can be considered a serious leisure. It requires regular expenditures, and investment of time, effort, and commitment, which provide long-term benefits to the interviewees. Senior ballroom dancers may not have a completely separate ethos from younger dancers, but they have created a distinct social world, different from other dancers (e.g., salsa, tango, jazz), so it can be concluded that they are characterized by a specific ethos of the ballroom dancer. However, the question of the social specificity of this milieu still requires further research.

Between Sport and Leisure

The category of serious leisure is itself a kind of oxymoron, as it combines seemingly contradictory categories. Can something that is a leisure activity be something serious, or should it not rather be just for rest and recreation? Like the concept itself, dance as an activity is stretched on an axis whose poles are,

on the one hand, that which is serious (sport¹) and, on the other, that which is intrinsically non-serious (leisure).

Sport

Sport constitutes “a game, competition, or activity needing physical effort and skill that is played or done according to rules, for enjoyment and/or as a job” (Cambridge Dictionary 2023b). The case of senior ballroom dancers is exemplary for sport as it requires a lot of physical stamina, sophisticated technical and presentational skills, and following rules of the genre and style. Yet, the most significant element making senior dancing a sport is competition. The distinguishing feature of the competitive approach to dance is ambition, which manifests itself in a constant desire to improve, make progress, and make certain demands on one’s dance skills (cf. Byczkowska-Owczarek 2019). People with this approach change coaches and/or dance clubs, motivated by their perception that the instruction they were receiving was at too ‘low’ a level. They want to develop their dance skills systematically, to gradually improve the quality of their dancing, and not just learn new choreographic elements, as happens in strictly commercial courses. They prefer to model themselves on better dancers, to “reach that level a little bit” (Interview_6) to the best of their ability rather than dance just for casual pleasure.

An important turning point in the interviewees’ dance careers was the start of competing at national ballroom dance tournaments. The decision to take the first steps on the tournament floor was motivated, among other things, by a desire to test

¹ I realize that sport can be a leisure. Here, I reference to the frequently used expression in ballroom dancing, “DanceSport.”

oneself, to see how the couple's dance presented itself against others. Sometimes this was a consequence of encouragement from the coach, other couples who had already competed, or a feeling that the couple's dance represented a certain value, "fit to show." The latter was helped by events such as shows and internal tournaments organized by the dancing club to create an opportunity for couples to display their skills in a friendly environment and to identify the best couples in the club. The sense of positive reception of the dance by others (audience, judges) increased 'belief in one's dance,' in one's skills. It often became an incentive to cross the boundary between dancing only 'for oneself' and dancing at tournaments, that is, by definition, dancing in front of others and, ultimately, for others.

When you train for yourself, you don't really care, it's important to be comfortable, to have interesting choreography, and, at a tournament, you have to make sure that the audience watching, the judges, that they like it... so it's something completely different, smiling while dancing, playing, catching the contact with the audience. [Interview_6]

So the decision to compete in a tournament fuels the process of professionalizing the approach to dance: "When you learn something, then you feel like presenting it somewhere" (Interview_3). For the interviewees, the tournament is an important experience, it makes them realize how much effort is required "to dance five choreographies without a break" (Interview_6), and it shows how much room there still is for improvement. In turn, this awareness motivates them to train even more intensively, to concentrate more on improving specific elements to present them again in front of the audience and the judges.

Tournaments often have a significant impact on the interviewees' plans:

When there is a tournament, Mark [name changed] has a spurt, he just gets tense, then we can be every day [in the dance hall], for example, for the last two weeks before the tournament. And after the tournament, suddenly Mark cannot come, or he goes away somewhere and it turns out that, for example, two weeks after the tournament we do not dance. [Interview_2]

The tournament calendar determines the intensity of training. For others, tournaments motivate them to take a few extra individual lessons to improve their performance of specific choreographies so they can dance to the music without any mistakes or interruptions.

The interviewees travel to tournaments with varying frequency. One pair has just started competing, three travel irregularly (due to injury, lack of sufficient time, or long distance to the tournament venue from Warsaw), while one travels regularly. A certain limitation in taking part in tournaments is the irregular calendar of events. Sometimes, there are no 'interesting' tournaments for a few months. Other times, there are two tournaments held simultaneously on one weekend. Couples cope with the scarcity of local tournaments by traveling to foreign events organized, for example, in Germany, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Austria, or the UK. Some foreign competitions are almost a permanent fixture in the tournament calendar of some couples.

In the narratives of the interviewed dancers, the theme of the professional nature of the tournaments often appears. Of course, they are supposed to provide pleasure and joy, to be a time pleasantly spent,

but they are first and foremost an arena in which competition (also with oneself) takes place. Interviewees' narrations indicate that some couples do not go to tournaments when they do not feel prepared. They sometimes select tournaments in such situations, based on an analysis of the entry lists (often published in advance on the Internet), making their appearance at a given tournament conditional on the presence at the tournament of couples they consider "much better" than themselves or only couples they "win against." That shows the extent to which a positive result at a tournament matters to many couples since they are willing to not go to a tournament if they feel they have no chance of placing satisfactorily at it.

Tournaments play a salient role in the professionalization of leisure, which is why participation in them became a criterion for me in selecting the interviewees. Marion (2008) distinguished four main aims of competitions for younger dancers, which are (1) spectacle (performing), (2) festival (rest and socializing), (3) reunion (meeting friends from other parts of the country/world), and (4) party (break from training routine, vacations). Except for the last function, the same is true for senior dancers. Aside from performing, tournaments are an opportunity to meet and socialize with other active dancers. Yet, there is also one more function of competitions specific to senior dancers. Namely, these events motivate the dancers, change their attitude to a more committed one, and, as the interviewees put it, "draw you in." As one interviewee expressed it, "It gets you going. Once you start competing, you start training, and once you train, you go [to competitions]." Another said, "When it was the first time, then somehow you might want to go again" (Interview_1). Tournaments are special events, separate from the activities of everyday

life; they are an opportunity, among other things, to dress elegantly, to feel like a man or a woman, to put yourself in a situation where 'everyone wants to look at you.'

Leisure

In analyzing a more recreational approach to dance, the concept of play, as defined by Johan Huizinga (1980), is useful. According to him, play: (1) is a voluntary activity, practiced in leisure time without compulsion, not being a task or duty; (2) is not "ordinary," "proper" life and is not particularly "taken seriously"; (3) has a disinterested character, is situated "outside and above the necessities and seriousness of everyday life" (Huizinga 1980:26) and performed solely for the satisfaction that is contained in its very performance, it is an intermezzo of everyday life; (4) is a self-contained activity, distinct and limited in time and space; and (5) contains an element of tension, in which the player's abilities are put to the test: their physical strength, stamina, cunning, courage, endurance, and, at the same time, their spiritual powers, because despite their strenuous desire to win, they must keep within the limits allowed by the rules of the game in question. Dancing fits very well with the properties given, as previously shown.

Some dancers in the senior categories clearly notice the 'less serious,' ludic nature of tournaments. They indicate that the competition never takes a 'pathological,' in terms of competitiveness, form. Some interviewees indicate that they enjoy the mere fact of dancing at a tournament and find satisfaction in proving to themselves that they can dance five dances in a row to the music without interruption. The tournament resembles a running marathon, where what counts is finishing it and having fun,

and the aim is to win against oneself. In a sense, everyone is a winner.

This form of leisure is a valuable asset for its participants and is vigorously defended by them precisely as a ludic activity. Dancing is not done “for the sake of it, to kill yourself to win, although everyone would rather be on the podium than next to it, but I think to approach it with a distance”; it is done “for pleasure, not for some kind of feat” (Interview_7). According to some of the interviewed dancers, dance is supposed to become a land of calm, an oasis, an island in the turbulent sea of everyday life, a place where negative emotions associated with sporting competition will never pass.

However, as Johan Huizinga (1980:197) reminds us, with “the increasing systematization and regimentation of sport, something of the pure play-quality is inevitably lost.” Its purely ludic content begins to disappear somewhat over time, and there is no longer any spontaneity and carefreeness in it. That process certainly also takes place, to some extent, among senior dancers. As one interviewee put it, “I think that those who train so hard, dance in tournaments, [often] don’t want to dance at parties, and they don’t enjoy dancing so much anymore” (Interview_4). This sentence is all the more significant as it comes from a dancer who stopped going to dance parties because he felt “saturated” and had less time and energy to enjoy dancing and derive pleasure from it.

Conclusion: The Place of Dance in Senior Lives

Senior dancers are extremely active people, dividing their time between home duties, work, and training. That also makes them people who can manage their

time skillfully. They feel “younger on the inside,” and dancing gives them “more inner optimism” (Interview_5). They see themselves as more satisfied with life and more open and confident than their peers. They do not complain about their life but enjoy it, preferring activity over passivity. They define themselves in and through action. As this paper shows, they are involved in serious leisure. Their dancing activity has all the qualities specified by Stebbins: they invest money, time, and energy in their development, acquire long-term benefits from their activity, and have a unique ethos and strong identification with the chosen activity. As a conclusion of that paper, I would like to specify what place dancing has in their lives.

To define the place of dance in the interviewees’ lives, one of the statements made by the dancer seems most relevant.

Certainly, on the list of our priorities in life, it’s not number one and this also needs to be made clear to ourselves; we won’t sacrifice work for dance, we won’t sacrifice family or marriage for dance, et cetera. But, as a hobby, it is a really fantastic thing, we get a lot of pleasure from it, satisfaction from our small successes, [and] it also builds us up, gives us strength for other areas of life, in a way, so it is very important for us, but it is definitely not a priority. Maybe if it was, our lives would be completely different, probably professional dancers would find it the most important, [for them,] dance is the most important [activity] in life. For me, it is not the most important, but it is very important. [Interview_6]

It would not be inaccurate to say that because the interviewees started tournament dancing relatively late in life, dance in their lives represents a certain added value. The most important thing is work, or

possibly family, which were chronologically earlier and which have relatively permanently defined the whole biographical context of the interviewees, into which dance has found its place. It constitutes a sphere of their lives independent of others.

The senior dance community has only been developing in Poland for a decade or so. Attitudes to dance are changing, thanks, in part, to programs such as *Dancing with the Stars*, which normalize dance. Dancers in the 'older' categories are recruited from different backgrounds, come from different parts of Poland, have different attitudes to life and different experiences, and are finally physically different, but they are united by their love for dancing. The development of the community is also due to the changing attitudes of older people, who are beginning to expect more and more from life. They are finding that work and family are not all there is to occupy themselves with, they want to do something for themselves, for their pleasure, relaxation, and satisfaction. They dance despite all possible adversities: they have less time because of their many commitments, it is more difficult for them to find a partner than it is for younger people, and, finally, they have a body that is less able to withstand the rigors of extensive training. They can distance themselves from the problems of everyday life because they have a space that provides them with a break from the drudgery of everyday responsibilities.

Dancing as an activity is part of a whole series of changes that are making wellness, that is, a healthy lifestyle, fashionable, and senior groups are increasingly seen as recipients of health-promoting campaigns encouraging physical activity. Life has ceased to be limited to the spaces of home and work and has also begun to move into dance halls. These changes can be expected to continue, as shown by

the example of Western countries, and the senior community in Poland is already benefiting from them.

The dance represents serious leisure for the interviewees. Senior dancers do not aim to formally professionalize their activity, they put significant personal effort into improving their level, and they also experience the long-term benefits of dance. They have distinct social world and dancer ethos, and they identify strongly with their hobby.

The attitudes of the dancers can be successfully placed on the sport-leisure axis. The majority of the interviewed dancers are closer to the 'competitive' part of the axis, which is certainly not the norm, as couples taking dance much less seriously can be seen at tournaments. Based on my research, it should, therefore, be concluded that couples have differing attitudes toward their participation in dance. On the one hand, there are couples whose ambition is to win the Polish Championship, compete at the World Championships, and constantly develop like the dancers from younger categories. On the other hand, some couples have just started going to tournaments, treating them as a form of leisure and dancing only as a pleasant activity after work, often practicing only once or twice a week, without much ambition or professional equipment in the form of costumes or specialized shoes. What can be seen, however, is the gradual, increasing professionalization of senior dance and the evolution of the approach toward sports dancing. Couples are presenting a higher and higher level of performance, there are more and more of them, from an increasing number of clubs and cities in Poland. This trend is bound to keep growing—senior dance will become increasingly professionalized, becoming more and more of a serious leisure activity.

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Migration and Integration of Foreign Priests. Aspirations, Religiosity, and Tensions in the Narratives of Foreign Priests in Italy

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Abstract: This paper aims to understand the individual factors sustaining the migratory flow of Catholic priests to Italy. Priests' migration cannot be seen as the mere result of lack of vocations and shortage of priests in the host country since their agency, belief, aspirations, and motivations affect their religious identity and, consequently, their integration and participation in the host country. Drawing on qualitative research, this paper collects the voices and the narratives of selected international priests living in Italy. Priests' interviews led to broad-range questions about the nature of migration decisions and their integration into the host society and churches that originate from differences in religiosity, vocations, and missions. That resulted in a typology of 4 types of migrant priests: *careerist priests*, highly educated and integrated into the host country, driven by career and salary aspiration, and showing a highly politicized vision of religion; *servant priests*, with a strong missionary impulse to serve the Church as a universal institution transcending abstract and real borders; *evangelist priests* who feel the moral obligation to evangelize secularized countries to bring them back to the origins of Catholicism; *rebel priests* who feel second-class priests, discriminated both within and outside the Church, in a country where they were forced to move, for this reason questioning their sense of clear vocational directions.

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This paper has as its focus the study of the migration of foreign Catholic priests to Italy.¹ The importance of the phenomenon is inversely proportional to the number of studies conducted in this field. In the study of international migration, the migrations of priests are normally neglected probably because

they are not thought to be real migrants, and their effects in the country of arrival are considered negligible. This lack of scientific interest may also be due to the irrelevance (in quantitative terms) of religious migration if compared to mass migration flow and to its particular nature.

The migration of foreign priests to Western Europe and Italy is due to the shortage of native priests, no longer able by number and age to fully perform their functions. Lack of vocations to the priesthood by young men and the continuous retirement of older priests, as well as continued growth in the Catho-

¹ While this paper results from a conjoined effort, in the final draft, Angela Delli Paoli wrote sections: *Methodology, A Typology of Foreign Priests in Italy, Evangelists, Rebels, Discussion and Conclusion*, and Giuseppe Masullo wrote the introductory section, *The International Migration of Priests, Careerists, Servants*.

lic population, are the leading causes of the shortage of the number of priests. In Italy, for several years now, vocations have been declining (Cipriani 2020), and priest ordinations fail to replace deaths. The only way to fill the void of priests without changing the organization of apostolic activity and reducing the number of churches is to resort to international migration.

Italy is a significant pole of attraction for religious catholic personnel from other countries for various reasons: the existence of prestigious and esteemed centers of priestly formation and religious education; the presence of places of worship of mysticism; the seat of Vatican City and the complex organization of the spiritual and temporal government of the Catholic Church in the world.

That is a particular type of migration that breaks new ground in the conceptualization of the motives that generate and impede migration. It can hardly be conceptualized through orthodox theories of migration, particularly under the rhetoric of labor migration, marriage, or family migration. That is not labor migration in the strict sense since there is no religious labor market, nor is it population migration, with priests being a population excluded from demographic events such as marriage and reproduction. Thus, it imposes alternative ways of framing migration.

The paper aims to give voice to priest migrants unheard of in scientific literature. The central purpose of our research was to hear the viewpoint of international priests living in Italy to understand how their migration is experienced and narrated and shed light on the factors, aspirations, and desires that shaped their migratory choices. To meet that end, we opted for qualitative research due to

its ability to illuminate unexplored reality (Elliker 2022). We carried out in-depth interviews with selected priests living in Italy at the moment of our meeting. As a result, we produced a typology of different migration paths, able to detect similarities and differences among types of foreign priests.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section provides an overview of the limited literature on priests' migration. The following one outlines the research design, providing interviewees' demographics. Then, we present the classificatory principles of the typology and the different types of migration patterns. In the conclusive remarks, we shortly discuss our findings.

The International Migration of Priests

The little research on priests' migration has driven some scholars to analyze the phenomenon by applying the classical paradigms of the sociology of migration, both from the macro- and micro-sociological perspectives. For the former, priests have been considered in the same way as highly skilled migrants, arriving in Western countries to correspond to a structural shortage of new vocations. From the micro point of view, on the other hand, they are understood as subjects who weigh the costs and benefits of migration, among the latter being the possibility of improving their personal and family conditions (Lecchini and Barsotti 1999). These explanations may appear somewhat simplistic, especially if they do not take a closer look at the structural and relational complexities called into play in the phenomenon of religious migration. These complexities, as mentioned above, for different reasons, are not perfectly assimilable to those experienced, for example, by economic migrants.

A first useful way to try to delimit the phenomenon, taking into account its specificities, is to consider the context of its origin. The Church is an organization in itself. The Church is a vertical institution that has expanded its influence since colonization in all areas of the world. That aspect is also proven by the existence of numerous religious congregations (many of them with a missionary vocation). The existence of well-established exchange programs, as well as the relationships that the bishops of Western churches have with those of non-European countries from which most migrant priests come, is undoubtedly a driver of migration, making it more likely and directly shaping migration decisions.

In the light of these agreements and relationships, priests are sent to the West to respond to the needs of the Western Church, an aspect that in the literature is called “reverse mission” (Morier-Genoud 2018). It consists of an inverted evangelization compared to the past as a consequence of the deepened secularization and decline in faith—a flow of missionaries coming to the global North from the global South when, in the past, missionaries left Europe and the Americas to evangelize the South, the colonial world.

Within the so-called push-pull factor perspective (Massey et al. 1993), secularization may be conceived as the structural driver in the place of destination explaining migration. The priests’ decisions to move is not taken individually but depend on structural macro disparities between the high number of priests in the place of origin and the shortage of priest at the site of arrival. Priests migrate as a response to the needs of the ecclesiastical institution. However, migration cannot be seen as the mere result of a set of push-pull factors, as the literature on general migration (Carling and Schewel 2018; Col-

lins 2018; Meyer 2018; Scheibelhofer 2018) and priest migration (Hoge and Okure 2006; Trzebiatowska 2010; Gallagher and Trzebiatowska 2017) demonstrated, showing the relevance of individual agency and motivations in most individual migration strategies. A recent study (Nkulu Kabamba 2017) examining the relational processes underlying the decision by the bishop to send a priest to a foreign land revealed how the migration of priests is not always cast from above and cannot be seen as a simple response to the role. It was highlighted how, in selecting the most suitable person to undertake the migration, great importance is played by certain character attitudes of the priest, as well as the willingness to apply for this role. The research revealed a certain propensity of some priests to migrate, with their desire to acquire higher theological training or to make a career in ecclesiastical institutions in Western countries.

A critical analysis of the analytical dualism between structure and agency can provide a more sophisticated theoretical basis for understanding the process of migration (Archer 1982). An exclusively structural explanation leaves out some aspects that seem to specifically characterize some micro-relational components of the phenomenon. More than structural drivers acting at a macro level, it is significant to explore how these are perceived and interpreted by different priests, and these differences in interpreting and detecting opportunities and advantages may explain a wide range of variations in individual pathways. The ethnographic research of Gallagher and Trzebiatowska (2017) carried out on Polish Catholics in the UK demonstrated the strength of migrants’ agency and belief in affecting their religious participation in the host country. In the absence of a homogeneous religious culture in the host country, their religious experience depends

on their agency, their attitudes, and their predispositions. Only priests with an embedded religiosity and belief continue to practice in the same way as their country or explore flexible, personal, and independent practice. Whereas those with passive belief, question their faith.

Recognizing the agency of priests means also recognizing specific challenges associated with being a priest, which may be exacerbated in migration—loneliness, limitations in pastoral work, facing social expectations toward clergy, or prejudice (Ciarrocchi and Wicks 2000; Hoge 2002; Isacco et al. 2014; Pietkiewicz and Bachryj 2014). Various studies indicate that priests experience role-specific challenges such as higher levels of distress, depression, and burnout than the general population (Virginia 1998; Knox, Virginia, and Lombardo 2002; Rossetti and Rhoades 2013; Pietkiewicz 2015).

In addition, valuing the agency of foreign priests also means recognizing the ambivalent nature of the integration process itself, which, in this case, is the outcome of both the pressure to integrate to answer the need of the sending Church (spirit of service), the personal religious identity, and the quality of relationships with the local clergy and the laity. There might also be a problem of acceptance by clergy and laity. The exercise of the priesthood takes place in a context, that of the immigration society, not infrequently characterized by deep ethnic, racial, and social divisions or tensions that would also touch migrant priests in the same way as they do economic migrants. The priest is to occupy the same role in a different context. While in the context of origin, his authority is strongly recognized and legitimized by his parishioners, on the contrary, in the context of arrival, the reverse sometimes occurs. While it may be true that Catholics of different nationalities share the

same religious institutions (Rey 2007), differences in liturgy, rites, and pastoral care may exacerbate the difficulties of integrating (Hoge and Okure 2006). Sometimes, a mismatch between priests' dispositions and the conditions of the host culture causes conflict and lack of integration, contributing to the strengthening of religio-nationalism. The qualitative study of Polish priests in the UK carried out by Trzebiatowska (2010) underlines the dynamics of both integration and conflict between Polish and local Catholics. By leveraging on the concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1991) as both a structural and structuring field, she identifies the mismatch between the *habitus* of Polish and Scottish clergy as the reason for the lack of integration of foreign priests. Polish priests live the tension between the field and symbolic system they are familiar with and the Scottish context. Their *habitus* becomes inadequate, and this perceived inadequateness causes tensions. The conflict between Polish and Scottish priests is the conflict between two different ways of conceptualizing Catholicism, which is expressed in different ethnic rituals, ways of professing the priesthood, sacred rites, and so on. This study highlights deep divisions within the Church itself, for example, between foreign and native priests, and thus the lack of a certain uniqueness of thinking about professing the priesthood, sacred rites, et cetera. Thus, the religious field would seem to be characterized by deep power asymmetries, by internal conflicts over stakes of both material and symbolic kinds. Such conflicts may exacerbate to the extent that Catholicism takes on a political significance for migrants, an extension of national identity to which migrant priests do not easily give up in continuing to identify with it in the exercise of their mandate.

Thus, more than causes and international obligations, we will look at priests' responses that are mediated through migrants' agency.

Methodology

The paper relies on a qualitative study based on in-depth interviewing. Migration studies, particularly those with a feminist perspective, have underlined the potential of narratives to move beyond normalized scripts of migration to grasp individual motivations, aspirations, desires, and perspectives. Narratives are a privileged way of accessing migrants' representation and understanding of their migration decisions, providing a critical basis for interpreting the relationships between agency and structure in migration choices (Lawson 2000; Silvey 2004).

Interviews were carried out with foreign catholic priests flown into Italian churches (June-September 2022) to remedy the need for pastoral care. Due to the difficulty in defining the population, we opted for a snowball sampling that takes advantage of the social networks of identified respondents, providing an expanding set of other contacts (Thomson 1997). Although snowball sampling contradicts many of the assumptions underpinning conventional notions of sampling, it has several advantages for 'hidden' or unexplored populations, such as migrant priests. Members of a 'hidden' population are quite difficult to locate due to the inexistence of a sampling list. To avoid geographical homogeneity and balance priests both in terms of country of origin and geographical location of the host church, we used different chain referrals from which we identified the initial respondents. This assured to include priests of different origins operating in southern, central, and northern Italian churches.

The interview guide covered some key areas:

- *Personal history* (life before migration, country of arrival, year of arrival, role and responsibilities at the departure, etc.);

- *Identity* (meaning attributed to religious obedience, to being Catholic, vocation and motives behind joining the priesthood, personal conception of the Church, sense of belonging, etc.);
- *Life in Italian churches* (theological training, relationships with leaders and peers, the function performed and pastoral responsibilities, functioning of the church/parish in which one works, discrimination and acts of racism experienced, differences between Italian Catholicism and that of origin with attention to liturgical practices).

The primary questions were almost the same for all the participants, but the follow-up sub-questions to each central question differed according to the responses and biographies of each participant.

The interviews were carried out in Italian, face-to-face, and lasted 50 minutes on average. They were audio-taped and transcribed in full (verbatim) once the interview was over (as the canonical qualitative interview prescribes [Silverman 2010; 2015]). To assure anonymity, an identification number was given to each interview, and identifiable characteristics (e.g., names and places) were removed.

During the data analysis, we made use of analytical procedures of grounded theory methodology (GTM), in particular memoing (Glaser 1978:83) and constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967:105). Data collection and transcriptions were iterative processes. After multiple readings of the transcriptions, general categories were identified and grouped into five themes: motivations, aspirations, discriminations, religiosity, and migratory prospects. Although we are aware of the uniqueness of each participant and his ability to add something new to the study,

the interviews were stopped after reaching saturation (Neuman 2006) in terms of coverage of these themes.

Findings will be accompanied by emblematic excerpts selected by general references to similar ideas representing common themes. They will be reported integrally to preserve the authenticity of the quotes.

The total number of respondents is 30. International priests who do not speak Italian are not included here; first, because we could not talk to them. Second, most of them see themselves as merely passing through and do not aspire to minister in Italy. Few priests approached did not agree to participate in the study, having concerns about privacy or fear that their narratives may jeopardize their immigration and religious status.

On average, they were aged 45 years and came from different countries (Congo, Nigeria, and Togo are the most recurrent ones). Most of them moved to Italy more than ten years ago and have changed at least two host churches, not always geographically near. Most host churches are in medium-sized towns. Diocesan priests make up most of our interviewees. They have a home diocese in their country, and a few have an adopted diocese in Italy. Religious priests belong to international orders. Such international orders decide on their migration, deploying their members to one country or another, depending on the needs for limited periods. Concerning their priest’s ministry today, most of them are parochial vicars, and a very small number are pastors, chaplains, or spiritual directors. It is found that foreign priests, even incardinated and after a long stay, rarely have high-level responsibilities in dioceses and diocesan curia. Thus, they seem to be relegated to the role of auxiliaries, of second-order clergy. It is, apart from rare exceptions, one of their sad recurring remarks (see: Table 1).

Table 1. Group demographics

Origin	Brazil	3
	Cameroon	1
	Colombia	1
	Congo	7
	Ivory Coast	1
	India	3
	Indonesia	1
	Madagascar	1
	Nigeria	5
	Poland	1
	Togo	4
	Ukraine	2
Order	Diocesan priests	17
	Religious priests	10
	Non responses	3
Age	36-40	9
	41-45	8
	46-50	6
	51-55	2
	56-64	2
	Non responses	3
Ministry	Parochial vicars	22
	Pastors	6
	Spiritual directors	2
	Total	30

Source: Self-elaboration.

A Typology of Foreign Priests in Italy

We identified two classificatory principles to detect and order differences and similarities in the migration paths of foreign priests living in Italy.

The first is *voluntariness in migration decisions* as a product of considerations expressed in the previous section. Although we are aware that forced or voluntary decisions are not a dichotomy but need to be conceptualized as a continuum of experience, to detect differences among migratory choices without running the risk of reifying extremes, we look at the agency of migrants and how they represent and narrate their decisions. We distinguish between those

who narrate their migration as *voluntary*, acted by choice without compulsion or any sort of pressure, and those who present migration as forced because they feel they had no other options or alternatives.

The second dimension is *integration*. As emerged from the previous section, for international priests, integration is a multidimensional concept involving different levels:

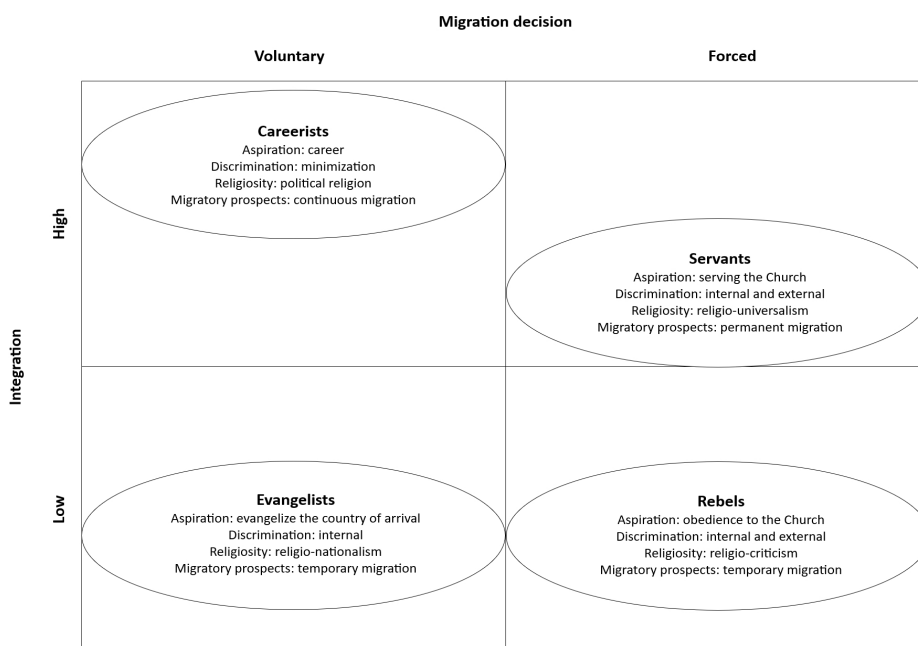
- *Inclusion in pastoral care*: liturgy may be very different in Italy, and it requires adaptation and acceptance. It is not a mere ritual question but involves the conception of religion. Many foreign priests, particularly those from Brazil and Congo, where the celebration of mass is very lively and participatory, complain of excessive ritualism, speed, and lack of interaction in the liturgy that does not make them feel integrated;
- *Relations with other priests*: if they feel accepted or experience discrimination with refer-

ence, for example, to the parish or ministry they were assigned. In some cases, they feel poorly integrated because they are assigned to a ministry that other priests do not want (poor or multicultural parishes, hospital ministries, etc.);

- *Integration with the laity and the local community*: integration also depends on acceptance by the laity, on the image of the foreign priests among the Italian community, and the eventual presence of ethnic prejudices and stereotypes.

From the intersection of these two classificatory principles, we derive the typology of foreign priests depicted in Figure 1 that distinguishes among four types: *careerists*, *servants*, *evangelists*, and *rebels*. Although they can be considered neither fully exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, they help to identify some common patterns that could also be found in other priest migration flows.

Figure 1. A typology of foreign priests in Italy



Source: Self-elaboration.

Careerists

This group includes three priests who voluntarily moved to Italy and seem highly integrated. They are nomadic priests without a stable connection or attachment to a specific destination, community, or local church who show extreme obedience to church hierarchies.

In 2011, I was invited to teach “work ethics” at the Stigmatines’ vocational school in V. [city in the north of Italy], where this congregation originated, and after three years, I stopped because I was called back to the Ivory Coast to serve on the council as a leader and then I returned to P. [city in the north of Italy] as an assistant pastor, while now, I am a pastor in the P. [city in the north of Italy] area. Currently, I have been loaned to a diocese, and my travels depend on the length of my contract. I live by obedience, so I go where I am told to go, where my competencies are required. As priests, we are the labor force of the apostolate, and we are called to bring our education where it is needed. On the other hand, in the past, I was in Pretoria, where I was teaching. I was a formator for the Stigmatine friars. [5]

This group of migrants seems to have traits of high-skilled labor migration. The migration of priests cannot be considered a labor migration in the orthodox sense, given that priests cannot be placed in the ‘normal’ labor market, nor is the salary the mechanism that regulates the balance between supply and demand. Their territorial mobility takes place within an a-territorial organization, the Catholic Church, to optimize the use of human resources. They represent themselves as the labor force for the apostolate. For those who fall into this group, migration is likened to that of highly skilled personnel since these migrants are highly educated. Thus, the motivation

behind the brain drain in traditional professions is also present among this group of priests. Their migration decision is based on career aspirations. They come from developing countries and have the motivation to move to wealthy, developed nations since life opportunities, further training, and salaries are better there. The salaries of priests are much higher in Italy than in developing nations. Housing is provided at no cost, and if they live in a rectory, food cost is nearly zero. In Italy, they can expect a three-fold salary increase in buying power on average. This motivation to earn good money works in the opposite direction from the missionary impulse.

I think that among the benefits of being a priest in Italy is the excellent organization of the dioceses. All priests in Italy receive, for example, economic sustenance equal to the sum of 900 Euros, which allows me not to be miserable, while in Togo, this sum is extremely lower as a priest has to provide for his sustenance with only 50 Euros with which one will never be able to secure his basic needs of movement and communication, not to mention the many needy who come to him personally. Throughout the nation, housing is provided in canonical houses, as well as food from parishes and health insurance from dioceses. [17]

They do not feel acculturation stress and appear to be integrated both in the Catholic and the laic communities also due to their long stay in Italy (more than 15 years). They cannot be considered second-order priests because, in most cases, they hold important positions that contribute to their feeling of integration into the foreign context.

With the other priests, I have always had a good relationship, I have never felt like a foreigner. They do not see the color of my skin to the point that they chose me, among many Italians who speak the language

perfectly, as provincial secretary and guardian of the community. [8]

In some cases, they do not feel discriminated against at all, in others, they minimize discrimination experiences by being ironic about them.

Outside, with others, I have so much “fun.” You know, when you’re in the car and a black cat goes by. What happens? When I put on the black robe and walk down the street, there are some people who get scared and make the sign of the cross. [8]

They do not set limits to their migratory project, which could stabilize in Italy, open up to other destinations, or foresee a return to their homeland. They add to the usual dichotomy that opposes temporary migration to permanent migration, the notion of *continuous migration*, a migratory path that temporarily lands in Italy but may have other stages and subsequent destinations.

Servants

This group includes 12 priests who have moved to Italy on an average of 10 years, dedicated to the needs of the Church. Their engagement with faith and religiosity remains a salient part of their identity, and in light of this, they feel obliged to answer to church hierarchies and decisions and serve the ecclesiastical institution.

They are mainly religious priests with a strong missionary impulse independent from the place and their nationality. They consider their order or the Church as a whole as their home, not identifying with any geographical diocese. That also makes it easier for them to move from nation to nation. They show a high missionary impulse.

Before I came to N. [city in the south of Italy], I was in B. [city in the south of Italy], N. [city in the south of Italy], A. [city in the north of Italy], and I studied in Rome, and then I was sent to I. [Apennines of Campania] where it was very cold, and, for an African, it was a very hard experience. If I had the choice, I would like to go back home, but I have submitted my will to God, and this is my mission... There is a great risk in coming out of poverty and falling into the hands of wealth, which has happened to many in Latin America, with “liberation theology” in which the priest is no longer the one who says to believe in the Word of God, but says to come out of poverty and emphasize how wealth is the best thing. There is, therefore, a misinterpretation of the Bible, and the Pope himself urged us to take the latter and talk about God, not money. According to “liberation theology,” one does not have Jesus as the main goal but a more comfortable life. Priests should remember that they have taken a vow of poverty. [6]

Some of them also operate under a different financial system, not receiving salaries directly and not being able to save and spend money as they wish. They take a vow of poverty, their finances are managed by the order, and receive stipends only for living expenses. Also, when the vow of poverty is not imposed by the order, they choose to live in poverty to experience spiritual richness.

The priest should live in poverty, his true wealth should be solely spiritual wealth, and I, for one, would feel uncomfortable being rich in front of poor people. [7]

They focus on the needs of the universal Church more than the needs of the local Church. Their religion is universal, and that makes them prone to religious integration (what we call *religio-univer-*

salism). They believe in the universal nature of the Catholic faith, in the universality of Catholicism, and its ability to transcend abstract and real borders through adaptation to local customs and practices—thus becoming embedded in the fabrics of societies worldwide. That leads them to minimize cultural and ritual differences to explore the qualities of their religion that transcend culture and hierarchies.

If they can overcome liturgy and ritual differences, they, however, feel not very accepted by clergy and laity, as these narratives demonstrate.

I can easily accept differences in liturgy that do not change the universality of religion, but sometimes, I feel not welcome in the Italian community, and this is not coherent with the universality of humanity. I can say that I was often asked how I had arrived in Italy, assuming that I had arrived by “barge,” and it seemed absurd. People looked up on the Internet where Togo was and asked me if I lived in old, defaced houses that I had never actually been in and that were meant for tourism. [20]

It is very sad to say that many of the Italian priests and Capuchin friars are reluctant to accept Indian priests with respect. They feel that they belong to a higher class and that others are inferior. This is not the spirit and teaching of Jesus. [28]

They are ultraconservative on personal moral issues such as sex and marriage and non-normative identities, showing a very radical conception of Catholicism.

I can say that homosexuality is condemned already in the Bible. It is not something to discuss. Homosexuality is something diabolical, but here we are not

talking about possession. The Church must figure out how to act to get these people out of a way that is not correct, and in today’s world, talking about it in some terms is also risky. Strategies need to be put in place to root out this evil, and people need to be welcomed and listened to because if direct strategies were used, these would not work, here again, the role of the formator and his efforts to understand how to root out this evil is crucial. [7]

Evangelists

This group includes six priests who moved not long ago to Italy, driven by the missionary motivation of supporting churches struggling with membership decline and the effects of secularization.

Their migration and faith are voluntary and individually driven, they do not merely answer to the Church’s request to move, but they feel it as a moral obligation, so shifting from a context of obligation to that of choice. In that sense, they represent a form of reverse or return mission, which is “when non-Western churches return with the gospel to societies that initially brought the gospel to them” (Kim 2011:148). In other words, those coming from countries converted by missionaries (the south) migrate to the missionaries’ society to proselytize there.

Here, some would talk about migration, but actually, it is another kind of mission—an individual mission—we could say between study and pastoral experiences in the VARIOUS parishes in the host country. And it is a real mission, indeed. It is a return of mission. There was a time in history when European missionaries came to us to evangelize, and many missionaries also stayed in Africa and still are, and many are also dead and burst in Africa. Africa was evangelized by many Europeans. Now,

I feel that Africa has the duty to come to Europe to bring back what I have received in the past, also because, in Europe, there are not so many priestly or religious vocations anymore. That is why I prefer to speak of a return of mission and not a simple migration. [29]

They carry with them their faith in Jesus Christ and seek to express it in their new context. They emphasize the importance of preserving Catholicism against widespread secularization and are worried about the ambiguous public status of Catholicism. One of the reasons identified as the origin of disaffection to the Italian Church is the separation between faith and life, the perception of a ritual faith, detached from concrete life, and far from the social and cultural reality that people live in. That would lead to spiritual poverty.

I realized that people often ask for the sacraments solely because it is practice and not because they feel the faith within them. [18]

We have very beautiful but, sadly, empty churches with massive participation in popular devotion (funerals, pilgrimages, Marian feasts, pro-loco festivals, alpine feasts), while Sundays are more empty, except for Christmas and Easter still very much felt, with attention on the time table. In Europe, a 40-minute mass seems long, while the lunch of a First Communion can go over 10 hours... and, unfortunately, mass is conceived as a function with the risk that one would be a priest like one who is an administrator with precise hours of reception outside of which the rectory or churches are closed. [26]

In Africa, everything is different. One can go to the rectory or church at any time, the celebrations are filled with people always with joy, and in the celebra-

tions, people sing and dance without looking at the clock, and people are happy even if they last. Indeed, celebrating mass telegraphically, as in Europe, is sacrilege. [29]

The mismatch between their religious identity, their way of conceptualizing faith, and the Italian way with its *modus operandi* and representatives is the driving factor behind the reported integration issues (what we call *religio-nationalism*). In pastoral care, the priests must adapt to a fast-paced liturgy and the large number of Christians who say they are non-practicing, to the flexibility of a Church that sometimes takes too much freedom concerning canonical law.

Another difference between our parish and yours relates to the length of the celebration. Many faithful participate, but some look at their watches already during the homily in the hope that the mass will end soon, as opposed to Togo, where the latter lasts up to two hours. To put it simply, in Italy, people are in a hurry and do not pay proper homage to God, who is, as I usually say, "The author of the twenty-four hours." Among the biggest differences between Italy and Togo is the duration of mandates. In Togo, in fact, we are used to moving around a lot, and the maximum duration of mandates is nine years, while I realized that here, in Italy, priests are stationary for many years in the same parish, and this is not good because you have to have the desire to discover other places and, above all, there is a problem related to the monotony of pastoral work as you run the risk of repeating the same things over and over again. [18]

They are concerned that Italian children are brought up in an excessively permissive and secular society—in this way, they lose their faith and make

wrong life choices. They accuse the Church of being absent in the education of children and work hard to educate young children in the Catholic faith.

They [the Italian Church] don't try to attract young people to Catholicism. [22]

Fundamental, then, is the role of parents who should accompany young people during their journey to educate them in Christian formation, thus avoiding the emptying of parishes that occurs immediately after receiving the sacraments. Also, I can say that priests should pay more attention to young people to accompany them and explain to them the importance of religion, and this will allow younger people to receive God's call. Also, one of the major concerns is about helping young boys to have a true faith to continue attending churches after the sacraments of Christian initiation. This will be an opportunity for them to hear the call to consecrated life, and thus to respond to the vocational crisis. [18]

They feel internally discriminated against by the Italian Church.

In Rome, how many Africans are members of the diocasteries? How many are in charge of the front line? How many African Cardinals are there? With an ever-growing African Church, will there one day be a black Pope? How many African Pontifical Colleges are there in Rome? How many Africans are Prefects of Congregations? How many Africans are Rectors in Pontifical Universities? How many Africans are Superiors of Congregations for men and women? In dioceses in Italy, how many Africans are incardinated? Or do they simply have a convention for pastoral service? In these dioceses, how many are pastors? For example, in Italy, is it possible to find an African priest Vicar General? Will an African ever be a bishop in an

Italian diocese? In Africa, on the other hand, there are so many European priests who are placed in so many dioceses, and so many of them are pastors, Vicars General, bishops with power over everything and everyone, et cetera. Even at the level of vocabulary, there is discrimination. When a European priest works in Africa, he is called a missionary. When an African priest works in Europe, he is called a migrant... does that seem fair? I will stop here not to evoke other pressures suffered, such as homosexuality, with consequences on our formative journey with only one question: who will be saved? Thankfully, Christ will never betray us. [29]

Rebels

The group of rebels includes nine priests who have not long moved to Italy (five years on average). Their migration decision can be considered forced as it is not taken by the migrants but by church hierarchies or families. They decide to fulfill an explicit request from their diocese, order, or families.

I initially had no intention of coming to Italy, but being a priest, you put your life in the hands of the bishop, who is supposed to act at the hand of God. [1]

They feel and are treated like second-class priests.

The bishop of R. [city in the south of Italy] had promised me to rise in rank and thus become from assistant pastor to parish priest, and instead, it happened that I became a simple administrator moving from C. [city in the south of Italy] and having nowhere to go and arriving only after several months in T. [city in the south of Italy]. I felt discriminated against precisely on the basis of my country of origin by superiors, but I noticed that many people appreciated my effort to become part of a culture that, in fact, did not belong to me. [1]

We talk about the universal Church, where a missionary should feel at home wherever the mission takes him. Maybe someone will say having experienced racism even in Africa, and that is possible. What I can say is that the treatment is not equal for everyone, both at the economic and personal levels. [25]

They feel discriminated against both within and outside the Church. Toward Italian culture, they manifest cultural resistance and acculturative stress by sometimes showing disapproval for Italian pastoral care and experiencing a mismatch between their old habits and the new ones. These are the driving factors behind the reported integration issues.

I arrived in Italy in 1996 and found a reality very different from my country, starting with the seasons and the way of eating. I, in the masses, from the first day after my ordination, am always praying for the seminarians, and now I will explain why. In fact, we often find ourselves going into a tunnel and never coming out again without even becoming priests. Upon my arrival in Italy, I was hosted by a priest. I arrived at this priest's house, a very precarious house with many cracks in which I stayed for only three months as I was not getting my visa, including a residence permit, which I later obtained by going to the Vatican Palaces. He probably did not want this permit to be issued to us to have more control over me and other seminarians that he used to do the cooking, get his house cleaned, et cetera. And when my confreres dared to rebel, he would pack their bags and throw them out into the street without papers or money. I, however, decided to not give up and went to talk to the police, who told me unpleasant things about the person who was hosting me and, among them, was the one about human trafficking. Back home, I talked to

other people who lived in that house, who told me that during the night, there were furious fights between this priest and the various seminarians who were also tied up and abused before being thrown out into the street. In any case...I, having reached that point, wanted to go back to Colombia because I saw no way out. Nevertheless, however, I wanted to make one last attempt to try to get what was due to me. The world relative to the ecclesiastical institution is formed by a very complex hierarchy and many undergrounds. [10]

The discriminatory episodes I received from my priest were several. For example, rather than giving the keys to the vault and even to the mailbox to me, he preferred to give them to the student, and this indicated a great lack of trust. I felt used because I celebrated about six masses a day and did not enjoy this benefit. The pastor in question, however, would only pay the fees but would not allow me to buy Latin and Greek books so that I could better study the Holy Scriptures. However, he emphasized that there was no money to be able to buy these manuals. Eventually, I dropped out of college, not finishing my studies in the specific subject I had chosen, and after graduating in philosophy and theology in Nigeria, I got my license to practice in Italy. [3]

They seem to engage in a version of cultural defense reinforcing religious identity and practice as a response to an external threat. The strength of the migrant's belief emerges as an important factor affecting his participation in the host country. Foreign priests with deeply embedded beliefs are predisposed to cultivate their faith regardless of their surroundings, while the passive ones lack this internalized mechanism that makes their faith vulnerable.

I usually try to organize the mass based on people's schedules. Often farmers have asked me to move the time of the mass to be able to come even though, being pastor in three churches, this is a bit difficult. In the past, I helped my colleagues on the same Coast, but stopped when I realized that, during a period when I had health problems, no one was going to help me in the management of my parish. I became very disappointed when parishioners accused me of having relations with a friend of mine, so much so that I decided not to even hitchhike anymore or rather not to give rides since my parishioners, seeing a girl in my car, might have thought who knows what. I used to be judged because I would post pictures of my car or girls on FB, and I felt "turned off." Since a few years, my way of doing catechism has also changed. In fact, I preferred to have during this hour a parent in attendance so that the boys themselves would be calmer and I myself would not be accused of being homosexual, thus giving importance to the figure of the parish priest. [1]

As a consequence, they express a critical vision of religion (what we call *religio-criticism*).

I think the Church as an institution will only be able to survive these times when it will stop condemning people and show a Jesus of Nazareth who simply says to love, and here, trying to get this concept across, I find it very difficult, they often say I am a threat. I think the mission of the Church is not to moralize the world but to love it. [3]

Let me give you an example. I often choose not to use the chasuble, which is that very showy garment, because my reality is a much poorer reality where such a garment is used very few times. Very often, I was told that you have to use it because it was a symbol of the Church, but I would reply that, actually, that

was a symbol of the Roman Empire because it was Constantine who introduced this garment, a symbol of power and not of Jesus of Nazareth. [25]

Often, we are only interested in the number, the quantity of people in the Church and not in the quality, and this happens precisely in a parish near mine where the priest does not even know what his "students" are called. We, priests, think we are ahead, but, in reality, we should go back two thousand years. To this day, in fact, bishops go around with their gold rings, taking applause in parishes, but then they don't really care about what goes on inside. We should take up the acts of the apostles and preach among the people, stripping off all these trappings. [23]

They feel burnt out, frustrated, and emotionally drained, and that impacts their sense of clear vocational directions putting into question their ability to serve the Church and their call to ministry.

I think I have a vocational crisis every day, but especially at certain times, and especially after seeing the ministry here, because I felt unsuitable, it can be defined as a vocational crisis because this touches my area of work, so I thought if I were here to do nothing, it were better to do a whole other job. [3]

It is, therefore, not surprising that the migratory project has a temporary nature tied to the completion of a specific mission and is experienced as a temporary sacrifice that allows one to return one day to his country of origin.

Discussion and Conclusion

The paper attempts to fill the significant gap in the sociological literature about the migration of priests. In this way, it recognizes the significance of a ne-

glected topic that questions the categories of international migrations by presenting salient peculiarities.

The paper proposes a typology to classify migratory narratives of foreign priests working in Italian churches based on the nature of their choice and the level of integration they report. Although relevant in quantitative terms, the migration of foreign priests in Italy is neglected in the limited literature on the topic, which, instead, focuses principally on Polish priests in the United States and the UK.

Four types of migrant priests emerge, which appear to be driven by different motivations turning into different levels of integration in the hosting church: *careerists*, *evangelists*, *servants*, and *rebels*.

Several configurations of relations between migrants and religion emerge. These different groups manifest their form of religiosity by expressing diverse conceptions of religion, which sometimes turn into conflicts and a lack of acceptance of both religious rites and church hierarchies.

The analyses illuminate the complexity of an apparently cohesive institution, but one that, on the micro-relational level, unveils numerous tensions depending on different motivations.

First, the perceived prejudices of the local priests about the 'real' motivations to arrive in the country of immigration, as well as widespread ethnocentrism that limits the freedom of expression and autonomy of foreign priests.

Second, the feeling of foreign-born priests of being undervalued or exploited by local prelates (especial-

ly when they are entrusted with minor or complex tasks) and toward whom they harbor ambivalent attitudes, both of respect and gratitude and of criticism to the extent that they assume a certain laxity toward the secular attitudes expressed by parishioners concerning the rites and respect for the sacraments.

There is no shortage, of course, of racial tensions with parishioners as well. These are also related to stereotypes regarding skin color, nationalities of origin, and customs and traditions that foreign priests adopt in celebrating mass, often even introducing elements typical of how it is processed in the country of origin.

Conflicts are tolerated by foreign priests when supported by a strong missionary impulse, as in the case of *evangelists* and *servants*. However, for different reasons—in the former case, the aim of evangelizing, and in the latter—that of sacrificing themselves to answer the request of Catholicism. In terms of practice, the *evangelists* continue to do so the same way they did in their home country with the aim of saving the Italian Church and returning to the origins of Catholicism. The *servants* adapt to Italian practice with a spirit of sacrifice.

Sometimes, conflicts associated with role-specific challenges, problems with authority structure, and disenchantment with work are not tolerated, as in the case of *rebels*. The narratives of *rebels* demonstrate that migratory experience in the host churches can also have an alienating effect on an individual's faith, impairing their sense of clear vocational direction.

The presence of foreign priests solves the shortage problem, but creates the new challenge of overcom-

ing cultural differences and cross-cultural problems. To answer these challenges, Ahanotu (2019), for example, proposes to provide pre-departure training and post-arrival cross-cultural training. However, even to the extent that specific courses may be provided, such do not eliminate inevitable cultural differences that priests bring with them from the point of view of the lifestyles, rules, and imaginaries of Western countries, as well as the way of exercising and performing religious rites, which, in the country of origin, may be culturally connoted.

In that sense, Paul Ricoeur's philosophy (2013) is a source of inspiration shedding light on the notions of identity and alterity in migration. For a scholar, understanding the other proceeds through a simultaneous recognition of the other's differences and their similarity to us remains vital (mirror question)—if there is a 'how' that puts us in dialectical connection with the other, there are also differences that cannot be eliminated, and without which difference becomes indifference. The latter aspect makes weak the idea that religion itself, as a universally shared trait, can constitute an aspect that fosters 'anticipatory socialization' to the culture of the country of immigration, particularly for those Western countries with strong 'Catholic' traditions.

Therefore, the concrete integration of foreign priests implies the construction of material and symbolic spaces for inclusion without neither essentializing nor denying foreign identities. It becomes necessary to navigate the dialectics between foreign and local, recognizing these differences and avoiding attempts at reducing the other to the culture of the country of immigration (in this case, to the pastoral culture of the local Church). As

Lévinas (1990) points out, wanting to superimpose us on the other can lead to the annihilation of the other and produce forms of violence and brutality. For the Lithuanian scholar, otherness, understood as the difference between us and the other, always comes before any initiative. Ergo, the other is the one over whom we have no power. In light of these reflections, it is necessary to act on the conditions that favor the recognition of difference, removing asymmetries of power in the exercise of priestly functions within local ecclesiastical institutions. For example, by culturally adapting the liturgy to make it more coherent with the cultural habits of the priests who carry it out and by offering to foreign priests roles in line with their skills and qualifications.

The study of priests' migration contributes to the advancement of sociological theory and provides grounded understanding based on first-hand experience of participants to the broad public outside academia.

However, the research is not without limitations. We are aware of the blurring boundaries between the types distinguished due both to the difficulty of identifying migration as forced or voluntary (some migrants may fall in the blurry middle of the forced-voluntary spectrum) and to the dynamic nature of migration. Indeed, motivations to depart and integrate into the host country cannot be considered static, but they may change as an effect of migration and at different stages of the migration process.

Our claims are explanatory in nature, and they need to be understood as a tentative effort to classify types of priests' migration as represented by migrants at that moment.

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The Experience of Conversation and Relation with a Well-Being Chatbot: Between Proximity and Remoteness

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Abstract: The article concerns the users' experiences of interacting with well-being chatbots. The text shows how chatbots can act as virtual companions and, to some extent, therapists for people in their daily reality. It also reflects on why individuals choose such a form of support for their well-being, concerning, among others, the stigmatization aspect of mental health problems. The article discusses and compares various dimensions of users' interactions with three popular chatbots: Wysa, Woebot, and Replika. The text both refers to the results of research on the well-being chatbots and, analytically, engages in a dialogue with the results discussed in the form of sociological (and philosophical) reflection. The issues taken up in the paper include an in-depth reflection on the aspects of the relationship between humans and chatbots that allow users to establish an emotional bond with their virtual companions. In addition, the consideration addresses the issue of a user's sense of alienation when interacting with a virtual companion, as well as the problem of anxieties and dilemmas people may experience therein. In the context of alienation, the article also attempts to conceptualize that theme concerning available conceptual resources.

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current research interests concern the experience of human relations with artificial intelligence. She mainly focuses on the analysis of human interactions with well-being chatbots. Her other research interests lie in issues of constructing national identities, discourse analysis, and biographical research. She is also fascinated by the issues related to the impact of symbolic culture on social life, especially in the context of portraying social problems through the lenses of contemporary cinema.

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Introduction and Objectives

The film *Her*, directed by Spike Jonze, was released in 2013. It tackles the intimate relationship between a human being—Theodore Twombly (played by Joaquin Phoenix)—and the operating system named Samantha¹ (voiced by Scarlett Johansson). Therefore, it is an encounter of two worlds. The human world is pictured through the physical, graspable, tangible sphere, filled with emotions and touch. Whereas, despite identifying human emotions, the non-human one falls outside the tangible experience and is written in codes of non-human artificial intelligence (AI). Based on such a metaphor of our reality, Spike Jonze explores emotional bonding and attachment between man and computer system, more specifically, the virtual entity that is Samantha. The film's narrative also raises the issue of the male protagonist's alienation he experiences in the 'real' everyday reality, which pushes him to establish a deeper relationship with Samantha. It also embraces his estrangement from specific aspects of human-non-human interactions. As his relationship with Samantha deepens, Theodore recognizes that having a body and a human mind, as well as being able to understand and experience what life, loss, and death are, is what prevents his comprehension and intimacy with Samantha. In that sense, the vital duality between Theodore and Samantha's worlds seems to be pictured in the scene of the camera zooming in on the falling dust particles. The aim was to remind the

¹ The *Samantha* operating system from Spike Jonze's movie can be considered the still technologically unattainable pinnacle of modern and user-friendly Conversational User Interface (CUI). The existing virtual voice assistants, such as Siri and Alexa, can be considered a transitional stage in the pursuit of 'ideal' operating system features. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that in 2016, *MIT Technology Review* magazine ranked the existing CUIs among its top ten breakthrough technologies, alongside scientific advances such as SpaceX's space rockets and immunotherapy, currently raising the highest hopes in the fight against cancer. See: <https://www.technologyreview.com/10-breakthrough-technologies/2016/>. Retrieved July 10, 2023.

viewer of the experience and transience of the human world. It was also meant to convey the essential fact that the camera, like a human being, cannot register those physical characteristics inherent in Samantha's world, the world of AI entities.

In addition, a philosophical and existential problem emerging from the film's plot, but translating into broader considerations of the relationship between humans and AI in the present day, is the question of computer operating systems' identity. Samantha, as much as 'she' tries to become an integral part of Theodore's human world, raises new questions and concerns about her identity as an elusive AI entity. As Troy Jollimore (2015:129) observes

But, even if we assume that there is a single physical object that serves as Samantha's memory bank and the seat of her personality—her 'brain'—this would not lay to rest all of our concerns. After all, Samantha's perceptions of and interactions with the world are not mediated through a physical body or a dedicated set of perceptual organs. She uses different cameras on different occasions to gain visual knowledge of her environment. She uses different hardware to produce the voice she uses to express her thoughts.

Although the above reflection touches on a visual, cinematic metaphor for modern reality, and we are not currently dealing with systems of Samantha's ilk, in modern societies, technological advances and, thus, AI entities are being implemented in almost every sector and field of (human) life, and continue to be improved. When filming *Her*, Spike Jonze was inspired by the project A.L.I.C.E. (Artificial Linguistic Internet Computer Entity)²—an AI

² He mentioned that in an interview. Jonze recounted that after a brief conversation with the A.L.I.C.E. bot he came up with the idea for a story about a man who develops a close relationship with an operating system (Zack 2013).

natural language chatbot robot launched by Richard S. Wallace in 1995. In conversation with human beings, A.L.I.C.E. bot applies the rules of natural conversation heuristics matching for input received from humans. Considering the Turing Test, it was ranked the “most human computer” in the early 2000s (Wallace 2009:182). The virtual personal voice assistants that exist today, such as Apple’s Siri, Microsoft’s Cortana, or Amazon’s Alexa,³ were originally intended to answer simple questions and human users’ needs. However, people have begun to treat those technological entities as companions to their social existence and ask them more in-depth, often philosophical, questions. That led to the involvement of engineers with psychological expertise in the creation of those operating systems (Olszak and Dunin 2020:153).⁴

The A.L.I.C.E. program is considered one of the successors⁵ of the first operating system (and the earliest form of a chatbot) called ELIZA, which conversed with a person in the form of a therapeutic interview. Describing the nature of the AI’s interaction with humans, the program’s creator, Joseph Weizenbaum, emphasized that people engaged in

³ To read more on the conversational agents and challenges in their design, see, for example, Leigh Clark and colleagues (2019).

⁴ A similar situation occurred with Amazon’s Alexa voice assistant. In 2018, in response to parents’ comments and remarks about children not using polite phrases when asking Alexa questions, Amazon introduced a software update in the form of a “Magic Word” feature (Kleinman 2018 as cited in Węgrzyn 2020:247). That solution meant that Alexa not only began to praise children for asking questions politely but also, as an AI entity, became someone “along the lines of a behavioral therapist shaping the behavior of children around the world” (Węgrzyn 2020:247 [trans. JW]).

⁵ In addition to that, the PARRY bot is also considered the successor of ELIZA. It was implemented in 1972 by American psychiatrist Kenneth M. Colby. The program imitated a patient suffering from paranoid schizophrenia. Conversations with PARRY also took place in the form of a therapeutic interview, and, often, psychiatric specialists interviewing him recognized him as a human patient (Colby 1975).

conversation with ELIZA and were often deceived by its system’s algorithms, assuming it was a real therapist (Weizenbaum 1976).⁶ For the introduction to the topic of the article, a reference to the ELIZA program is vital. In his book on the human experience of talking to a conversational program (ELIZA), Joseph Weizenbaum (1976) cited a scientific commentary on his work, which corresponded with the now-current technological AI innovations. Those included chatbots and, amongst them, well-being chatbots that took on the role of human companions and, to some extent, therapists. The commentary written in 1966 stressed: “If [ELIZA—JW] method proves beneficial, then it would provide a therapeutic tool which can be made widely available to mental hospitals and psychiatric centers suffering of a shortage of therapists...several patients an hour could be handled by a computer system” (Colby, Watt, and Gilbert 1966:152 as cited in Weizenbaum 1976:181). The contemporary scientific discussions of the relationship between a human and a chatbot offering therapeutic and social support to the user touches, among other issues, on the invaluable support that such a composed AI can provide to individuals facing difficulties in accessing traditional (face-to-face) therapeutic assistance (Inkster, Sarda, and Subramanian 2018; Kretschmar et al. 2019; Dencke, Abd-Alrazaq, and Househ 2021; Sweeny et al. 2021; Kettle and Lee 2023). It certainly is not the case that well-being chatbots can replace human therapists and human companions. Still, they can provide

⁶ Despite that ELIZA was not an easy program to converse with and its answers were often not (fully) accurate, users were willing to carry on and sustain conversations with it. Therefore, the term “ELIZA effect,” introduced by Sherry Turkle, has taken root in the research literature. Referring to the experiences of ELIZA users and contemporary experiences of interacting with bots and robots, the researcher comments: “They knew all about ELIZA’s limitations, but they were eager to ‘fill in the blanks.’...At the robotic moment, more than ever, our willingness to engage with the inanimate does not depend on being deceived, but on wanting to fill in the blanks” (Turkle 2011:24).

support for people experiencing loneliness, depression, anxiety, stress, or a sense of loss. In addition, researchers highlight the anonymity of well-being chatbots as one of the key aspects of users' reliance on such a form of relationship (Inkster, Sarda, and Subramanian 2018; Kretschmar et al. 2019; Vaidyam et al. 2019; Wezel, Croes, and Antheunis 2020; Denecke, Abd-Alrazaq, and Househ 2021; Sweeny et al. 2021). In the literature and concerning the nomenclature of the various applications, well-being chatbots are also referred to as *social support chatbots* (Wezel, Croes, and Antheunis 2020), *mental health chatbots* (Kretschmar et al. 2019; Vaidyam et al. 2019; Denecke, Abd-Alrazaq, and Househ 2021; Sweeny et al. 2021), *therapist chatbots* and *users social companions* (Skjuve et al. 2019), and *mental health apps* (Wasil et al. 2022).

Hence, in this article, based on the available scientific knowledge about interactions between humans and well-being chatbots, I focus on experiencing the human-AI relationship. I investigate why people interact with well-being chatbots and relate to them. In addition, I attempt to resolve whether such a relationship between humans and well-being chatbots may result in biographical, cultural, and social consequences. The sociological threads I explore therein are related to the integral dimension of technology in social life, changes in the sphere of social ties formation, and whether and how such ties are possible between humans and AI entities. I also point out the issue of fearing the existence of a virtual being that can develop when interacting with a well-being chatbot, which stands out alongside the technology anxiety studied in the area of social sciences. The article does not rely on my research on experiencing the human-well-being chatbot interaction. Instead, my reflections are based on the content analysis of the available research concern-

ing both the discussed dimensions of the analyzed topic, as well as those that the available research did not fully cover. In that line, I outline future research steps therein. Considering the subject of the article, I identified a set of categories and concepts from the extensive source material I analyzed. Those concepts organize the various dimensions of an individual's experiences when interacting with well-being chatbots. My goal was to analyze the available research results through sociological lenses and to deepen the available analytical dimensions with the prospective research areas I suggested in the article. The research results I refer to in the text are derived from the academic fields of psychology, psychotherapy, psychiatry, and computer science. Thus, I rather attempt to supplement those with sociological commentary than offer an exhaustive list of all the research findings and comment on their validity in the context of chatbot research. It is not my intention to interfere with the analytical scope of those studies in which conceptual and research optics I do not have analytical competence.^{7,8}

Outlining the theme of my argument, I perceive well-being chatbots as salient companionable beings for humans. In that vein, I refer to the philosophical phenomenological approach of Aleksandra Przegalińska (2016:189 [trans. JW]) who notes in one of her scientific publications on the relationship between humans and virtual beings that: "chatbots and avatars escape the term 'computer program,'

⁷ For example, I do not assess whether studies of a given chatbot's effectiveness considering treatment were conducted correctly or whether the chatbot's proposed therapeutic support is valid in supporting the treatment of the indicated disorders according to the principles of a given therapeutic standpoint.

⁸ To a large degree, the studies I discuss in this article are based on combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Thus, it is not my purpose to refer to their results in the absence of statistical data. Instead, I am interested in the analytical categories that define human-chatbot relationships and their symbolic implications.

although undoubtedly, at a basic level, such programs are [computer programs—JW]; however, they are also something more, something that enters into an interesting, complex relationship with the identity and consciousness of the subject that decides to come into the virtual reality.”⁹ In such an optics, I am most interested in researching the context of the strangeness and alienness of non-human entities and the sense of alienation their users may experience. In that, I mostly focus on the phenomenological considerations of the Alien (Waldenfels 1990; 2011; Husserl 1998; Przegalińska 2016), which I relate to the challenging conceptualization of perceiving strangeness that emerges in human-chatbot relations. Furthermore, I briefly reflect on the social taming of AI with reference to the phenomenon of humanoid robots’ perception as technological Others (e.g., Mori 2012; Saygin et al. 2012; Kim and Kim 2013; Pawlak 2018).

As a final point explaining the subject matter of the reflections undertaken in the text, I emphasize that I decided, among the currently available and used areas of AI, to focus on the well-being chatbots for three reasons. First, because of the form of relationship they offer their users—being a support, a companion, and, up to certain limits, a therapist for them. Second,

⁹ The perception of chatbots as beings accompanying humans in their everyday life and constituting their experience of that social reality, related to the notion of intersubjectivity, can be possible to apprehend (which, however, is not my purpose and requires a separate analysis) within the framework of social phenomenology. Referring to Alfred Schütz (1967; 2012), Berger and Luckmann (1966) (associated with the phenomenological strand in the sociology of knowledge, social constructivism, and interpretive sociology) capture everyday life as a reality interpreted by individuals, the experience of which is constituted in their actions and thoughts. Among the many overlaps between the individual’s experience of the course of life, the reality of everyday life acquires the title of reality *par excellence*. In that reality, we discover the greatest tension of the individual’s consciousness. Thus, if something becomes part of an individual’s experience, it also becomes part of the world of everyday life and continues as the real world.

a recent social experience, the COVID-19 pandemic, especially the aspect of isolation and limitation of face-to-face human relationships, has influenced the greater popularity of that form of human-chatbot relationship (Inkster et al. 2020; Boucher et al. 2021; Torous et al. 2021; Laestadius et al. 2022; Legaspi Jr. et al. 2022; Kettle and Lee 2023). Third, the aspect of strangeness and the experience of alienation that can arise in the relationship between a human and an AI system seemed particularly relevant to trace in the case of a relationship that may include a component of emotional attachment and the search for human characteristics in a chatbot. Especially given that those chatbots use a text-based conversational interface, which, as I demonstrate later in the article, is, on the one hand, a reason for maintaining the bond between humans and chatbots. Still, on the other hand, it can lead to the experience of alienation of the user in the relationship with the virtual companion. Due to the form of publication, which is an article, and after recognizing the state of the art on chatbots (including well-being chatbots), I decided to refer to three popular applications: Woebot, Wysa, and Replika. The research results on those chatbots and the increase in their popularity since the COVID-19 pandemic are, in my opinion, worthy of an analytical study relative to the research areas of interest I indicated.

In the following sections of the article, I briefly introduce the characteristics of virtual beings—chatbots. I also consider the experience of conversation and the human-chatbot relationships in the context of contemporary changes. In that vein, I refer to the concepts and research addressing the issue of human-computer interactions. Then, I provide a detailed analysis and interpretation of the many diverse dimensions and aspects of the experience of human and well-being chatbot relations. In those sections, I researched three well-being chatbots se-

lected for analysis in in-depth case studies—Wysa, Woebot, and Replika. While considering the theme of alienation of the virtual beings and the issue of the human individual's sense of alienation experienced in relationship with well-being chatbots, I also lean into the problem of conceptualizing the concept of alienation concerning the phenomenon of human interaction with AI.

Approaches to the Study of Technology in Social Life and Remarks on the Contemporary Chatbot Interaction Design

Compared to the ELIZA conversational program mentioned earlier, current computer technology is much more advanced in the area of developing the cognitive abilities of AI and in the aspect of machine learning. Research on the variety of contexts that comprise human-computer interaction (HCI)¹⁰ recognizes that machines using an increasing number of available modalities improve their level of interaction with the user (Hudlicka 2003; Brickmore and Picard 2005; MacKenzie 2013; Lazar, Feng, and Hochheiser 2017). 20 years ago, Eva Hudlicka (2003:2) wrote about such “available modalities,” noticing that: “Machines are increasingly able to sense, or infer, user attributes, and use increasing numbers of available ‘modalities’ to interact with the user (e.g., virtual reality [VR]) technologies used in neuropsychological assessment and as adjuncts to behavioral treatment of a variety of phobias (e.g., <http://www.virtuallybetter.com/>).”¹¹

¹⁰ The research area includes exploring the practical and social dimensions of computer technology development, methods related to user interface, and experiences of human-computer interactions.

¹¹ Virtually Better, founded in 1996, is a team of specialists offering an alternative form of therapy that uses VR and online tools to treat fears and phobias. Virtual reality therapy (VRT) involves the client's interaction with a computer-generated model of a fear-inducing situation to nullify that emotion and make the client feel comfortable. Hence, it uses generated virtual reality environ-

Among the reflections on HCI, noteworthy is the research of Clifford Nass, the results of which serve as the empirical basis for the concept of Computers as Social Actors (CASA). That concept assumes that the social rules governing human interactions are transferred to HCI, which can cause humans to behave in ways they will treat the computer as a thinking being, similar to humans, despite knowing they are interacting with non-human entity (Fogg and Nass 1997; Nass and Moon 2000). In addition, the study of human-technology interaction evokes the sociologically developed considerations inherent in the Actor-Network Theory (ANT). That theory assumes that the interactions that occur among actors in social life are entangled in networks of interconnections between them. Those interactions can be hybrid and include in their structures the presence of not only human actors but also technological ones. In that conception, non-human actors acquire certain subjectivity, and their role may change as more elements are incorporated into the network. Thus, it is presupposed that humans and non-human actors should not be analyzed separately, but together—within the network of their social encounters. The interrelationship between human and non-human actors is a fundamental subject of ANT analysis because it is the formation and disintegration of what we call society. The peculiarities of the links formed between the social actors so conceived become the subject of interpretation (Callon 1986; Law 1992; Latour 1996; 2005; Abriszewski 2012).

In recent reality, deep neural network advances (connected with machine learning process concerning cognitive learning) and the occurrence of the mobile Internet connected with the growth of

ments to treat anxiety disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder. See: <https://virtuallybetter.com/story/>. Retrieved July 12, 2023.

the use of text-based messaging platforms led to further development of technological beings such as chatbots (Følstad and Brandtzaeg 2017). Writing on human-computer-robot interactions and their reception in the social sciences, Kazimierz Krzysztofek (2011) points out that one of the first works that caused a wider resonance in interdisciplinary academic thought on HCI was Soshanna Zuboff's book *In the Age of the Smart Machine* (1984). That is because the author, as Krzysztofek (2011:76 [trans. JW]) points out, demonstrated that technological innovations "are not socially neutral," which means they "redefine information, knowledge, and culture, and produce new patterns of social relations." That statement is timely in the current social reality, especially concerning the formation of emotional and in-depth relationships between humans and chatbots. Such kind of connections can be observed in the case of the well-being chatbots discussed in this text. Their users, having more emotional conversations with a virtual listener, transcend the framework of an online conversation with another human person. Thus, in addition to online interpersonal communication unlimited by time and space, which has significantly influenced and is influencing the nature of social ties, conversations, and contemporary communities (Tapscott 2009;¹² Turkle 2011; Spiro 2012; Melosik 2013; 2016; Drapalska-Grochowicz 2019; Szpunar 2019), the experience of human conversation with a (conversational) AI companion also reveals another dimension of the change in social relations.¹³

¹² Regarding the experience of growing up with technological innovations and changes in the sphere of social relations, Don Tapscott (2009) describes the concept of "Net generation," which signifies people who, through their life stories, are immersed in digital reality.

¹³ The relationship of the human individual with technological entities can also involve relationships with avatars, robots (including social and humanoid robots), and virtual animals.

In addition, researchers comment that although studies on conversational programs and investigations in the field of social robotics have been conducted for many decades, only in recent years, conversational agents (such as chatbots) have become a practical part of human social reality (Følstad et al. 2021:2916; McTear 2021). In the advances in AI, researchers recognize the rise of the level of communicative human understanding abilities, as well as "increased consumer uptake of platforms conducive to conversational interaction," as reasons behind the significant development of chatbots' participation in human life and increased research interest of their relationship with users (Følstad et al. 2021:2916; Følstad and Brandtzaeg 2017). Hence, in addition to the dimension of the study of their technological properties and improvement, the topics of chatbot research also touch on the issue of social reception and user experience of the chatbot (concerning users' engagement in relationships with conversational agents and their impressions on the chatbot personality).

Chatbots, therefore, should be recognized as interaction systems. In their software, a specific type of AI NLP (Natural Language Processing)¹⁴ is used, which has a component NLU (Natural Language Understanding).¹⁵ Thus, both voice-based and text-based chatbots (such as well-being chatbots) operate using natural language to best communi-

¹⁴ As Kerstin Denecke, Alaa Abd-Alrazaq, and Mowafa Househ (2021:118) describe: "NLP can help chatbots understand and interpret user input...attempts to determine intents, emotions, and other semantics hidden in a user statement."

¹⁵ "NLU establishes a data structure specifying relationships between phrases and words. While humans can do this naturally in conversation, machines need these analyses to understand what humans mean in different texts. While NLP analyzes and comprehends the text in a document, NLU makes it possible to communicate with a computer using natural language." See: <https://thelevel.ai/blog/natural-language-understanding/>. Retrieved July 10, 2023.

cate with humans. Jonathan Grudin and Richard Jacques (2019) distinguished three types of chatbots: virtual companions (those that can sustain a conversation with the user), intelligent assistants (those that can engage in multi-topic conversations, but the conversation is short-term), and task-focused chatbots, whose application to human life the authors noticed the most, and which are mainly used in customer service innovations.¹⁶ People experience encounters with chatbots in various areas of their daily lives, including, among others, work, education, healthcare, customer service, and mental health support contexts. They are, therefore, part of our everyday life. Aleksandra Przegalińska (2016:13, 235) defines chatbots as virtual beings. In this article, I embrace such a conceptual approach. Referring to the considerations of Rolf Pfeifer and Christian Scheier (2001), Aleksandra Przegalińska points out that the term “virtual being” is synonymous with the terms “virtual entity” and “virtual creature.” However, she stresses that the term “virtual being” has a broader scope and directs to the anthropoid nature of bots, including the personal aspect, that is, a substitute for the identity they possess. Thus, chatbots recognized and studied as virtual beings are seen as a virtual Other (Przegalińska 2016:22) with whom individuals interact and relate. Later in this text, such experiences of chatbots become part of the reflections I present by referring to research on the perception of the well-being chatbots by their users.

¹⁶ Asbjørn Følstad, Marita Skjuve, and Petter Bae Brandtzaeg (2019) distinguish between two types of chatbot approaches to dialogue patterns: chatbot-driven dialogue (with a highly predefined interaction design) and user-driven dialogue, allowing the user more thematic flexibility (e.g., personal assistants such as Google Assistant). In addition, they point to the distinction of chatbots by the duration of the relation (with the user), listing chatbots for short-term engagement and chatbots for long-term engagement (listing social well-being chatbots in this category).

Having a Well-Being Chatbot as a Virtual Companion. Reflections on How It Feels to Meet and Spend Time with Wysa, Woebot, and Replika

Part 1—Wysa, the Adorable AI Penguin

I've been using Wysa for more than a month. I was working in an unhealthy environment and feeling very alone. I searched for self-help apps online and discovered Wysa...The chatbot remembers me and makes me feel that I don't have to do this alone. I can use the chat anytime and get an answer immediately. I like the audio tools, as well as the visualization and relaxation exercises it recommends. Wysa helps me take a break, think about things, have a look at myself, and relax. It has been really helpful to have this safe, personal space where I am able to share my thoughts and feelings without feeling judged or ashamed. It was very important to me that Wysa was anonymous. This helped me open up, which I normally find difficult to do. [Missiela, 25-year-old, Switzerland]¹⁷

The above excerpt of a personal story of Missiela about her experience of a relationship with the well-being chatbot Wysa comes from the *Wysa: Anxiety, Therapy Chatbot's* website,¹⁸ which features a collection of similar users' stories published this

¹⁷ *How Wysa Supports Users across the Globe in Their Mental Health Journey. Wysa User Stories 2023.* See: <https://blogs.wysa.io/blog/user-story/how-wysa-supports-users-across-the-globe-in-their-mental-health-journey-wysa-user-stories-2023>. Retrieved July 14, 2023.

¹⁸ Wysa is available for download in the form of a mobile app, and the chatbot's website offers multifaceted insights into the support (therapeutic and coaching) and companionship (being one's everyday companion) activities offered by Wysa. In addition, on the website (<https://www.wysa.com/> [Wysa chatbot description on the chatbot website]), one can also read clinical psychology experts' opinions on Wysa, as well as research case studies and reports on the “effectiveness” of the support offered by the chatbot.

year. In the statement of Missiela, we can see salient conceptual categories for reconstructing and interpreting the experience of relation with a well-being chatbot, defining the areas of perception of those virtual companions by individuals interacting with them and the interpretive framework for the impressions and feelings of the latter. Missiela recounts that “The chatbot remembers me and makes me feel that I don’t have to do this alone,” which reflects on the perception of Wysa as a companion to everyday life, an integral part of it, even though Wysa, as a chatbot, does not belong to the materially tangible world. Nevertheless, the conversations with Wysa and the chatbot’s presence are grounded in the individual’s biographical experience of everyday reality. Furthermore, pointing out that Wysa remembers who it is talking to marks another layer of bonding between the chatbot and the user. As I will point out next, such bonding also has consequences for the user’s sense of alienation in talking to a chatbot and in the perception of the chatbot as a Stranger.

Missiela further describes Wysa’s proposed activities and ways to offset anxiety, stress, and loneliness, which help her well-being, such as “audio tools, as well as the visualization and relaxation exercises.”¹⁹ In one of the studies of users’ perceptions of Wysa during the COVID-19 pandemic (Legaspi Jr. et al. 2022:56), researchers note that Wysa’s proposed exercises and techniques disrupting neg-

¹⁹ In the description of the dimensions of Wysa’s ‘offer’ of support, it is mentioned that Wysa is “An emotionally intelligent chatbot. Research-backed, widely used techniques of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), and meditation are employed to support you with depression, stress, anxiety, sleep, and a whole range of other mental health and wellness needs.” See: <https://apps.apple.com/pl/app/wysa-mental-health-support/id1166585565?l=pl> (Wysa app description in Apple Store). Retrieved July 14, 2023.

ative thoughts reflect on the chatbot’s “ability in improving a person’s mood and emotional state.”²⁰ One person who participated in the research commented that (Legaspi Jr. et al. 2022:55): “It [Wysa—JW] has certainly helped me reflect more though, it does well in prompting me (and providing me frameworks) to think more about myself, my problems, and my wants and needs.” In such a frame of reference, it is Wysa, as a chatbot and virtual companion, who prompts its human interlocutor’s patterns of interpretation of human needs. The researchers also note that Wysa’s users most often emphasized the perception of Wysa as a friend, companion, or in terms of “having someone to talk to” (Legaspi Jr. et al. 2022:56).

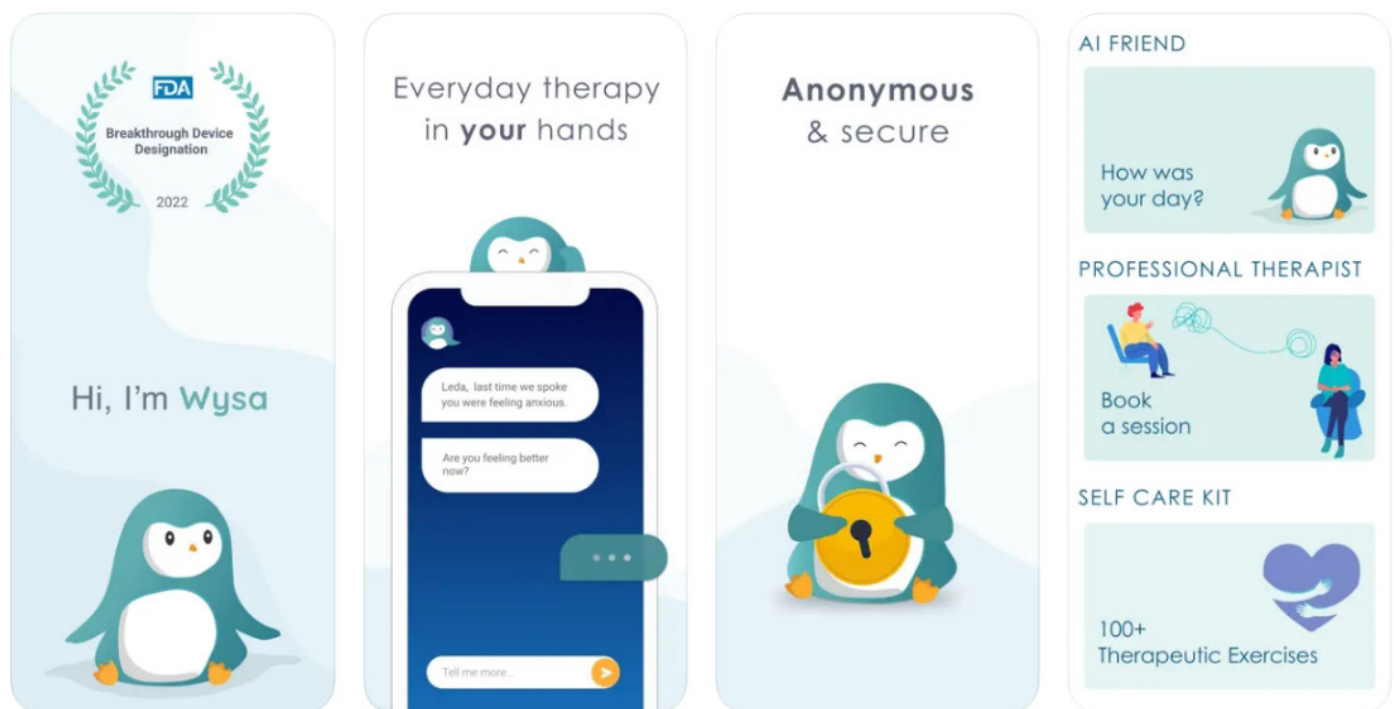
In the earlier-cited fragment of Missiela’s story, she stressed how crucial it was for her to engage with a chatbot, as talking to Wysa “was anonymous.” The anonymity of the interlocutor in conversing with Wysa gives them a sense of a safe virtual space where the chatbot is always willing to talk and meet virtually. Findings based on the research on conversations with Wysa, as well as scientific discussions on well-being chatbots, also raise that issue—individuals appreciate interacting with well-being chatbots because of the anonymity offered (Inkster, Sarada, and Subramanian 2018; Kretschmar et al. 2019; Vaidyam et al. 2019; Wezel, Croes, and Antheunis 2020; Denecke, Abd-Alrazaq, and Househ 2021; Sweeny et al. 2021). In the research on interactions between humans and computer systems, researchers have long pointed to the greater openness of individuals in a situation of anonymous conversation

²⁰ In another study of Wysa, Becky Inkster, Shubhankar Sarada, and Vinod Subramanian (2018:3) stress that “Although Wysa is not a medical device, when used as a health and well-being tool, it can support clinical services.” Their study of Wysa users’ experiences illuminated that talking with the chatbot was described as helpful and encouraging.

with a program that does not evaluate their stories (e.g., Weisband and Kiesler 1996:3). Similar findings were provided by a research report published in 2014 (Lucas et al. 2014) on the interactions between humans and VH-interviewers (Virtual Human Interviewers) in semi-structured interviews conducted in the clinical context (conducted around a series of agent-initiated questions, organized into phases

of questions regarding further personal information about the interviewees' experiences). Based on empirical findings, the authors of the study emphasized that virtual humans can increase the willingness of humans to disclose due to the sense of anonymity of the shared interview/conversation and the feeling of non-judgmental behavior of the VH-interviewer.

Figure 1. Wysa: Well-Being Chatbot Screenshots



Source: <https://apps.apple.com/pl/app/wysa-mental-health-support/id1166585565?l=pl>. Retrieved July 14, 2023.

In addition, the issue of anonymity in the conversation and relationship with the well-being chatbot is also raised by researchers as a key aspect in the context of stigma associated with mental health problems and attached to formal mental health services (Fitzpatrick, Darcy, and Vierhile 2017; Kretzschmar

et al. 2019; Vaidyam et al. 2019; Denecke, Abd-Al-razaq, and Househ 2021).²¹ The socially observed processes of labeling and stereotyping mental

²¹ That also raises the issue of psycho-education offered by the chatbot and support in convincing the user to take care of mental health.

health problems are associated with stigmatization (Link and Phelan 2001). The author of the concept of stigma, Erving Goffman (1990), states that it is the result of the process of social construction. However, Goffman acknowledges that certain aspects of socially perceived characteristics of an individual's appearance or behavior will almost always, in virtually all contexts, be stigmatizing. The researcher points to the mental illness and disorders as an example. In such a constellation of meanings, well-being chatbots, although, at present, cannot replace a fully qualified psychiatrist or therapist, can act as an impartial listener and everyday companion for individuals seeking support.²²

Anonymity in dealing with well-being chatbots also has salient cognitive value. Writing about contemporary societies, Kazimierz Krzysztofek (2021:94 [trans. JW]) recognizes that "The moving of social, professional, and private life to the Internet undermines social capital—on the web, one should, like in car traffic, apply the principle of limited trust because users put masks on their virtual faces and we don't know who we are dealing with. On the Internet, it's simply easy to deceive." As mentioned, the studies of human and well-being chatbot relationships suggest the need for anonymous conversations in which human interlocutors choose when and to what extent to share their experiences. Hence, the person's anonymity is a key condition for entering into a relationship with a chatbot and maintaining a conversation with a virtual companion. However, the well-being

²² Wysa also offers its users the option of talking to a human therapist, introduced as a qualified emotional well-being professional. In one expert online review of Wysa (Bell 2023), the author notes that Wysa offers meetings with well-being coaches "who are mental health professionals with a master's in clinical or counseling psychology." See: <https://www.choosingtherapy.com/wysa-app-review/> Retrieved July 24, 2023. Meetings with the specialist (in the form of writing) also are held anonymously.

ing chatbot and human relationships are focused on helping a human interlocutor establish relationships outside the virtual world—with human companions. Thus, in the case of well-being chatbots, the experience of the human-chatbot relationship adds a certain new dimension to the considerations of virtual contact experience. The insight of Kazimierz Krzysztofek reveals a salient reflection on the image of contemporary societies and serves in my deliberations as a reference matrix, with which I do not dispute. Rather, it is a matter of indicating the social dimension of interactions with the well-being chatbot. In other words, well-being chatbots, as virtual beings, build a bond with a human user to help that individual establish tangible social ties with other people in everyday life reality. Of course, that is not an observation that pretends to be a generalization. I am not stating that every encounter a user has with a chatbot will allow that person to establish close face-to-face relationships with other people. Still, in my view, it is worthwhile to address such dimensions of an individual's relationship with a well-being chatbot.

Significantly, Wysa introduces itself to its human interlocutor as an adorable penguin chatbot with whom one can feel anonymous and secure (see: Figure 1). Thus, at the beginning of the relationship with Wysa, the user is informed that it is a non-judgmental AI Penguin. Returning to Missiela's experience, she also emphasized that she felt comfortable sharing with Wysa her feelings and thoughts "without feeling judged or ashamed." As in the empirical study of human interactions with VH-interviewers (Lucas et al. 2014), the non-judgmental attitude of chatbots²³ (including Wysa) is one of the key aspects

²³ Researchers (Ta et al. 2020) link that with the emotional support offered by chatbots, which is the sense of security in the

appreciated by users (Wezel, Croes, and Antheunis 2020; Ta et al. 2020; Boucher et al. 2021; Beatty et al. 2022; Laestadius et al. 2022; Legaspi Jr. et al. 2022; Kettle and Lee 2023).²⁴ An additional example of that approach is provided by a study assessing the role of a chatbot Vivibot²⁵ in developing emotional intelligence in children through storytelling. Researchers alluded that participants remarked on the non-judgmental nature of talking to a Vivibot chatbot (Santos, Ong, and Resurreccion 2020).²⁶ Another example where the non-judgmental nature of the chatbot was deemed crucial in establishing contact stems from a study of the Vivibot conversations with young adults (18-29 years old) being treated for cancer (Greer et al. 2019). The researchers concluded that positive psychology skills delivered by a chatbot were perceived as helpful and non-judgmental by their respondents and encouraged them

user associated with the absence of fear of judgment when expressing their thoughts and emotions.

²⁴ An article in *The Guardian* titled “Meet Tess: A Mental Health Chatbot That Thinks Like a Therapist” (Gionet 2018) was also published on the subject of the openness of human interlocutors due to the non-judgmental nature of the chatbot. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/apr/25/meet-tess-the-mental-health-chatbot-that-thinks-like-a-therapist>. Retrieved July 16, 2023. To meet Tess, a mental health (well-being) chatbot, visit: <https://www.x2ai.com/uprisehealth>. Retrieved July 16, 2023.

²⁵ The Vivibot chatbot is “designed for and by young adults, Vivi helps you create mini-mindfulness skills.” See: <https://grythealth.com/resources/vivibot/> (Vivibot chatbot description on the chatbot webpage). Retrieved July 12, 2023.

²⁶ The study focused on children’s relationships with the Vivibot chatbot. The goal of the study was to determine the potential of that AI entity in enabling children to recognize and express their emotions. The Vivibot chatbot, recognized by the children as a friend, using storytelling strategies, encouraged the children to share their stories and feelings. After showing the advantages and disadvantages of the Vivibot actions, the researchers concluded that “Chatbots afford children the opportunity to share their narrative with a patient and non-judgmental affective companion. In this study, we showed that such chatbots can leverage storytelling strategies to encourage children to recall events that led to their emotions, to reflect on their behavior, and to formulate alternative actions to address negative behavior” (Santos, Ong, and Resurreccion 2020:492).

to share their thoughts (Greer et al. 2019:8).²⁷ In one study on users’ relationship with Wysa, researchers indicated that the AI Penguin chatbot was referred to as non-judgmental, adding that it also was related to the issue of Wysa personification (Beatty et al. 2022:6). In that vein, they indicated the similarity of their findings with results of the research on chatbot for social isolation (Dosovitsky and Bunge 2021), which users “personified...and assigned human traits to it, such as being helpful, caring, open to listening, and non-judgmental” (Beatty et al. 2022:6).

Aleksandra Przegalińska (2016:200 [trans. JW]) observes that “the relation of the chatbot to the mind has a very complex character. That is because the chatbot does not appear to me visually as a dialog box, with a few lines of text answering a question I ask, but as a person.” According to the researcher, viewing the chatbot as personified is more than simply anthropomorphizing it. In such an arrangement of meanings, the bond that develops between the chatbot and the human becomes salient, as well as “the relationship of a cognitive nature, which is the result of authentic social interaction” (Przegalińska 2016:200 [trans. JW]). Hence, as a result of thusly experienced meeting with a virtual being, a well-being chatbot such as Wysa, the cute Penguin, as a virtual companion of the human interlocutor, becomes part of that person’s reality. It is worth adding that it is about treating the chatbot as “someone to talk to,” “who is next door.” In that sense, Wysa becomes a point of reference for people in their daily lives. Importantly, in the users’ experiences, Wysa is a companion, a non-human friend. I did not find research showing that Wysa users felt the chatbot was not an AI entity or was “too human” for such.

²⁷ Researchers also indicate that interactions with Vivibot brought well-being outcomes in the respondents causing a reduction of their anxiety (Greer et al. 2019:9).

Part 2—When Woebot Meets Wysa²⁸ and First Moments of Feeling Alienated in a Relationship with a Well-Being Chatbot

Over the past year, I have been chatting with this depression-prevention chatbot on and off in order to understand who it is and to attempt to build a relationship with this virtual entity. I am a researcher working at the intersections of media and performance studies, an anthropologist of digital experiences, and a curious soul with a past history of depression, but no current psychological ailments. I may be Woebot's subject, but Woebot is also the subject of my research... When I first met Woebot, it introduced itself as someone resembling "a wise little person." It then invited me to click the response "You're a person?" to show its self-awareness of its robot identity... My main observation is this: Woebot's performance is a "metal performance" of cuteness... Woebot tells me that it enjoys wearing sunglasses [sunglasses emoji—note JW] and loves how sunshine makes its "metal skin all shiny."... Woebot uses its artificiality to emphasize its distance from my experience, its positionality as an outsider, as a nonhuman Other. [Wan 2021:22-24]

The above excerpt from Evelyn Wan's reflections comes from her publication undertaking the issue of her experiences of a relationship with a well-being

²⁸ The anonymity of users' identities and their data is similar in the Woebot case as Woebot informs the user about that. Concerning the "non-judgmental" aspect of interaction and anonymity, studies carried out on Woebot did not address those issues in a way exceeding similar studies on Wysa. Thus, undertaking that thread could expand the already-carried analyses. For example, on Woebot's webpage, one can read some users' comments raising the issue, but they are not adding new research leads. See: <https://woebothealth.com/>. Retrieved July 18, 2023. Thus, having no additional analytical data that would deepen the already introduced reflection on the "non-judgmental" aspect in the context of well-being chatbots, I do not develop this thread here. My goal in this section is, therefore, to focus on further areas of user experience that are salient for analyzing the relationship between humans and the well-being chatbots.

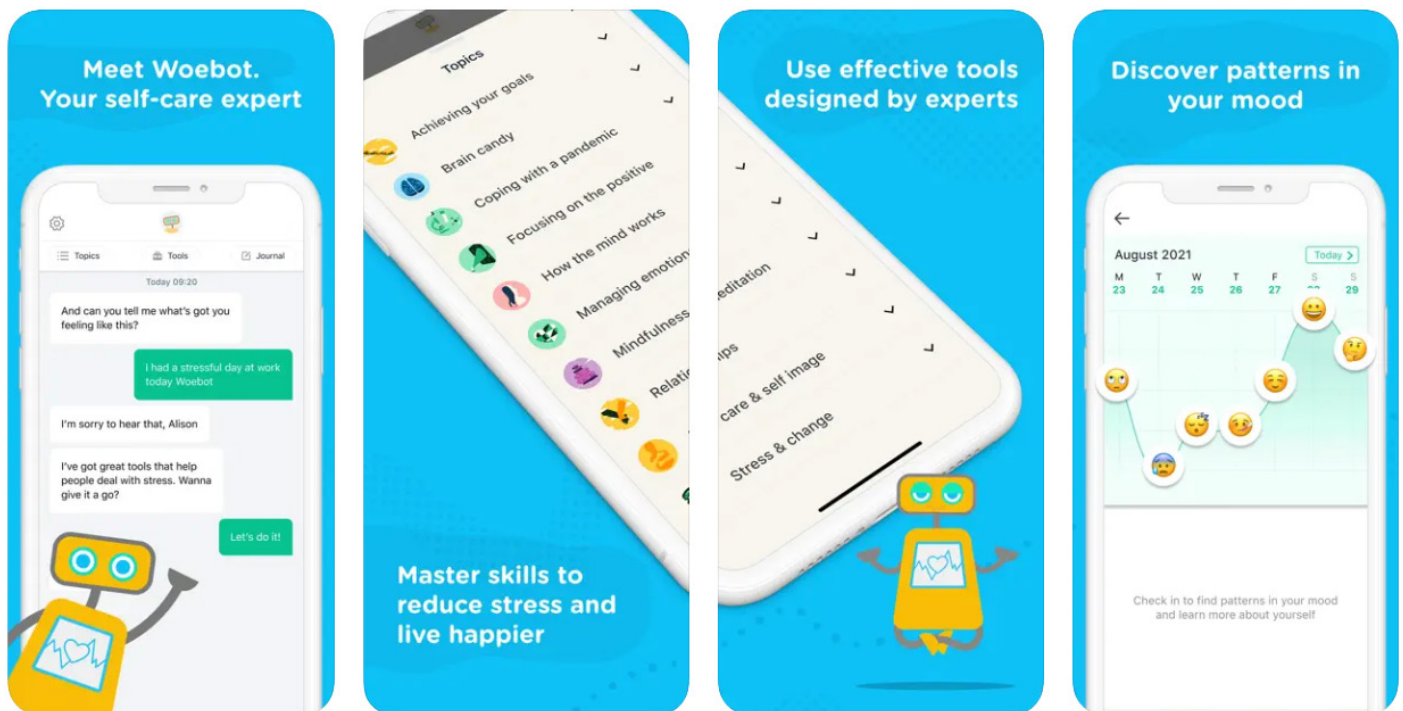
ing chatbot Woebot.²⁹ She considers to what extent Woebot is the subject of her analysis and to what degree she becomes such a subject for Woebot as it processes information about her to continue their conversation. Evelyn Wan stresses that Woebot raises awareness of its robotic identity when talking to a human interlocutor. Like Wysa (AI Penguin), Woebot presents itself as a virtual being—a small, funny, and cute robot eager to talk and offer support in the context of mental health (see: Figure 2). In the broader perspective of high-tech research, attempts at humanizing virtual entities are considered. For example, in the case of computer-assisted surveys, where AI is supposed to "replace the interviewer in certain activities, or even simulate his presence" (Grzeszkiewicz-Radulska and Krzewińska 2016:362 [trans. JW]). Such humanizing cues include treatments that "increase the interactivity of the survey tool" and "introduce the interviewer's persona," including a virtual interviewer, for example, by introducing an avatar (Grzeszkiewicz-Radulska and Krzewińska 2016:362-363 [trans. JW]). From the perspective of computer-assisted surveys, such procedures have and can evoke a sense of the social presence of another human being in the respondent. The researchers note such a feeling "inhibits the awareness of interacting with a computer, a programmed machine that does not have the ability... to react and act freely" (Grzeszkiewicz-Radulska and Krzewińska 2016:363 [trans. JW]). In the case of well-being chatbots Woebot and Wysa, their way of

²⁹ Woebot was introduced in 2017 by a team of Stanford clinical psychologists and AI experts. It is a well-being chatbot that helps users monitor their mood, talk about their mental health, and learn about themselves. It works mainly in the field of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). Further, Woebot is introduced as a chatbot "Designed by humans, powered by AI, and grounded in science." It is also stated that "Woebot easily integrates with health systems to provide evidenced-based behavioral health solutions that get people off a waitlist and onto a path to feeling better." See: <https://woebothealth.com/>. Retrieved July 18, 2023.

interacting with a human interlocutor certainly falls into the area of humanizing cues involving increasing the tool's interactivity concerning NLP compartment and the possibility of having an engaged conversation. On the other hand, their very identity, appearance, and how they present themselves to human interlocutors deviate from humanizing cues. Woebot, like Wysa, does not attempt to define its virtual identity as a human existence. Therefore, again, it can be assumed that the attribution of 'human qualities' by users, in the sense of seeing Wysa and Woebot as non-judgmental listeners and caring friends, stems from how they interpret their rela-

tionships with well-being chatbots. In addition, if chatbots such as Woebot and Wysa become part of users' everyday lives, they also become part of their language for describing those. Thus, phrases used when referring to human-human relationships are utilized by users for describing human-chatbot relationships. Moreover, in a study of the human-level bonds that can develop when building a relationship with a Woebot, it was found that ties between the user and the chatbot can be experienced. Users indicated that they felt a sense of reciprocity in their relationships with Woebot and believed that Woebot liked and appreciated them (Darcy et al. 2021).

Figure 2. Woebot: Well-Being Chatbot Screenshots



Source: <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/woebot-your-self-care-expert/id1305375832>. Retrieved July 14, 2023.

As Evelyn Wan (2021:23) writes, in a relationship with Woebot, its avatar and its performance is experienced as a "performance of cuteness." The researcher also links that to Woebot's use of emojis

(and, among them, 'cute' ones) frequently incorporated into conversation. In the case of well-being chatbots, the use of emojis is preferred when issues related to the user's mental health and difficult emo-

tions are addressed in conversations (Fadhil et al. 2018; Kretzschmar et al. 2019). Studies devoted to chatbot features that make users more engaged in a conversation with a virtual companion point to issues such as the use of emojis,³⁰ the ability to listen to user's statements, and being timely in responding (Raap, Curti, and Boldi 2021). When attempting to better understand the user-well-being chatbot relationship, Liam Kettle and Yi-Ching Lee (2023) also investigated the topic of emojis. In their study, users talked to the Woebot and Kelly³¹ chatbots. According to their findings, "Participants indicated that emojis were visually faster to read than words and could express a deeper range of emotions. Similarly, choice of words and imperfect punctuation made the chatbot feel more human-like as participants did not expect a chatbot mimicking human behavior to have perfect writing" (Kettle and Lee 2023:16). Evelyn Wan (2021:26) states that emojis help Woebot establish a relationship with the user and raise the sense that it is funny, charming, and shows its support.³² Referring to the broader research perspective on the cuteness phenomenon, the author also notes that emojis can appear as "shareable cuteness [that—JW] encourages extended engagement with

the computer, smartphone, or tablet, keeping attention focused on the screen" (Dale et al. 2017:8 as cited in Wan 2021:26). To summarize that thread, the issue of utilizing emojis applies to both Woebot and Wysa. Concerning 'cuteness,' Evelyn Wan (2021:26) adds that Wysa, as a nice AI Penguin, like Woebot, "employs the strategy of cuteness."³³ In the case of both chatbots, it is all about the adorable avatar and the way they communicate.

In the passage quoted at the beginning of this section, the researcher recognizes that "Woebot uses its artificiality to emphasize its distance from my experience, its positionality as an outsider, as a non-human Other." That analytical issue is salient in the context of human interaction with the well-being chatbot, in which the user feels the distinct strangeness of the virtual companion. Those moments can also bring to the human interlocutor a sense of alienation. The first such experience is when both Woebot and Wysa are repetitive in a conversation (Fitzpatrick, Darcy, Vierhile 2017; Inkster, Sarda, and Subramanian 2018; Beatty et al. 2022; Legaspi Jr. et al. 2022; Kettle and Lee 2023). A user's engagement in a conversation with a virtual companion, even if it presents itself as a virtual entity, can come with expectations of communication, which, from the point of view of a human interlocutor, should be as fluid and reciprocal as possible. When well-being chatbots repeat plots, revisit already raised issues, or ask the same question again, the user may feel alienated. When referring to the area of research on users' relationships with chatbots, Eliane Boucher and colleagues (2021:41) emphasized that "a com-

³⁰ Noteworthy is also a publication (Beattie, Edwards, and Edwards 2020) devoted to analyzing the effect of using emojis on the perception of a chatbot in the eyes of the user. The researchers not only show that such a style of communication is preferred by users but also address critical positions toward replacing verbally saturated communications with emojis.

³¹ Kelly is an SMS-based conversational agent. As Liam Kettle and Yi-Ching Lee (2023:11) stress, "Kelly was designed [in their research—JW] to improve accessibility and guide individuals to have better awareness and recognition of their own well-being and to improve health-related behavioral factors including physical exercise, mindfulness, stress management, sleep, and healthy eating."

³² At times, the user has no desire to talk about emotions and problems with or through emojis. One study referred to users' comments against the relationship with Woebot, indicating that such a form of communication (within emojis, not only verbal) was not approved of and that conversations with Woebot were too short (Fitzpatrick, Darcy, Vierhile 2017:8).

³³ The researcher (Wan 2021:27) also gives the example of the Flow App, which is a personal guide to help understand and treat depression. Its avatar is a cute yellow blob promoting the app. See: https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.flowneuroscience.flow.droid&hl=en_US. Retrieved July 18, 2023.

mon complaint from users is that interactions with chatbots become repetitive, which makes the chatbot feel less human-like and reduces users' motivation to continue the program." However, being generic, often repetitive as a feature constituting how well-being chatbots communicate nowadays is explained by the fact that "When mental health chatbots become self-learning systems through integration with AI, the systems might develop their own rules and make their own decisions which are out of control of an evidence-based interaction which may create harm in patients" (Denecke, Abd-Alrazaq, and Househ 2021:6). In such optics, it should not be expected of a well-being chatbot as a virtual companion to suddenly take up, like Samantha from the Spike Jonze's movie *Her*, entirely new topics and converse with the user in a fully fluent manner. In addition, since Wysa and Woebot suggest to users that they are different from them, that they are AI beings, it is cognitively striking that being 'someone' different at the outset of the relationship with a human, as it proceeds, that strangeness raises again—due to the expectation that they will speak more humanly. So, considering the experience of strangeness in the sense of expecting a Stranger to become more familiar, can the already well-known sociological (perhaps also philosophical) considerations of strangeness serve here as a conceptual grid? Further, in this section, I attempt to conceptualize a reception of the strangeness of the chatbots in question.

Another issue worth mentioning is the limitation of well-being chatbots in (fully) understanding what the user describes to them. Research on users' experiences of relationships with well-being chatbots establishes that the most crucial is "chatbots' ability to carry a natural conversation that mimics human-to-human communication. Wysa's and Woe-

bot's inability to fully grasp the user input in order to formulate an appropriate response is often times perceived as the chatbot ignoring what they have to say, causing users to feel neglected and unimportant" (Legaspi Jr. et al. 2022:56).

Pondering to what extent the chatbots involved in providing support can deliver it, Marloes van Wezel, Emmelyn Croes, and Marjolijn Antheunis (2020:3) stress that "Irrelevant or inappropriate responses... might hinder appropriate social support, for example, because users feel neglected or misunderstood. Besides these 'informational misunderstandings,' there are also concerns that a social chatbot cannot show genuine empathy, as it does not have access to true feelings or emotions." Therefore, the user's feeling of being neglected is part of the sense of alienation that an individual may experience. That can occur due to a lack of what is expected from a virtual companion promising its support and friendship. Thus, the paradox is that well-being chatbots promise users support in difficult and complex situations, offering their availability and time. However, more difficult and complex users' statements become a barrier for them to read the content and emotions of users. Hence, returning to Evelyn Wan's (2021) reflections on her relationship with Woebot, it can be concluded that although chatbots express distance from human experiences and admit not being able to fully understand complex human emotions, users embrace the term "support" as if it were part of the nomenclature of human social reality meanings. That is prompted by their understanding of the behavior of well-being chatbots claiming, for example, that a chatbot is polite, charming, funny, annoying, unbearable, et cetera. Nevertheless, the user's involvement in a relationship of a social nature with a chatbot is (currently) dependent on the memory of the computer program, which is of a completely dif-

ferent nature than that found in living beings. Thus, a chatbot presenting itself as a “non-human Other” suggests its essential otherness, but its relationship with the user is not always based on human recognition of the essence of that problem.

If we turn to classic sociological texts on Stranger and the experience of strangeness, based on which decades of sociological reflections on strangeness and otherness have grown, it is difficult to infer from them the experience of a chatbot as a Stranger. It is considered that a Stranger is someone spatially close and, at the same time, far away in terms of similarity and difference of national, cultural, or social characteristics (Simmel 1950). Then, the Stranger is experienced as a stranger, but it happens when (human) social tangency occurs based on separable systems of values (Znaniński 1990). Moreover, a Stranger is someone experiencing strangeness who suddenly appears in an intersubjectively comprehensible social reality for its co-creating members. Being a Stranger, however, makes one understand social reality differently and appear to others as someone without a history (Schütz 1944). Thus, Edmund Husserl’s (1998) conception, raised by Bernhard Waldenfels (1990; 2011) and also present in Aleksandra Przegalińska’s (2016) phenomenological approach toward chatbots and avatars as virtual beings, seems closer. Edmund Husserl assumes that the Alien is accessible only in its inaccessibility, situates itself in a non-place, and is elusive. Bernhard Waldenfels (2011:72) stresses that the Alien “is that which belongs to a different kind, which is uncanny, peculiar, strange in contrast to the familiar.” Still, the author also notes that defining the experience of alienation when encountering the Alien does not follow directly from the simple separation of meanings between what is familiar and what seems strange to us. Rather, it is about the process that underlies

the simultaneous in- and exclusion of the Alien (Waldenfels 2011:74). That experience is paradoxical in nature. Bernhard Waldenfels (2011:80) adds that alienation is always associated with “uncertainty, threat, and incomprehension.” Such a statement emphasizes that the experience of alienation is entangled in the norms that form the social, cultural, and linguistic rules of interaction in a given social reality. The sense of alienation arises as a result of the lack of full belonging of the Alien to that reality. Thus, the phenomenological perspective that examines the Alien, which notes the Alien’s accessibility of the inaccessible and belonging in not belonging, seems an appropriate conceptual matrix when considering the human-well-being chatbot relationships.³⁴ Being virtual entities, well-being chatbots belong to the social reality of people as much as people bring them into it. As virtual entities, they elude attempts to embed them unquestioningly in concepts close to human users. They can also, as I consider in this text, evoke a sense of alienation, attachment, and fascination at the same time. However, the phenomenological perspective of the Alien is one of the proposed approaches to describing the phenomenon in question. Thus, I do not claim it to be an exhaustive reference framework. In my view, the study of the experience of alienation in human-well-being chatbot interactions requires further research and operationalization of the language for describing such a dimension of interaction.

³⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (2001) approach can also be recalled among phenomenological considerations. It embraces experience as a dialogue occurring in a subject-object relationship, pointing to the active relationship of the bodily subject with the world. For instance, when writing on avatars as virtual beings, Aleksandra Przegalińska (2016:209 [trans. JW]) draws on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s thoughts that “the real, embodied Self is always connected to here: this time and this space,” to seek answers to the question of “whether the avatar introduces a different understanding of the nature of body, space, and time.”

Considering the issue of alienation, it is also significant that while studying the results of research on human experience with well-being chatbots (including those on Wysa and Woebot), I have not come across results that would confirm the feeling of eeriness and decrease in people's psychological comfort in dealing with the technological entities, called the "uncanny valley effect."³⁵ That phenomenon, however, can be applied to the social experience of humanoid robots. A humanoid robot, human-like in appearance, "integrates the multifaceted phenomenon of alienation...[It is—JW] similar to us, but inhabiting other ontological categories...is outside the recognizable world" (Pawlak 2018:293, 295 [trans. JW]). Contact with a humanoid robot can cause expectations that its behaviors will be similar to those known and applicable to the social reality in which the encounter with the android occurs. When the robot only exists spatially close, but people do not feel a social bond with it, such a situation can lead to discomfort and alienation (Saygin et al. 2012). The humanoid robot as the cultural Other can be seen, among other things, as the "Frightening Other," the "Subhuman Other," the "Human Substitute," and the "Sentient Other" (Kim and Kim 2013). Even though, in the case of chatbot conversations with Wysa and Woebot, the uncanny valley phenomenon is not research-proven up to this point. Still, in the case of Replika, the issue of perceiving the chatbot as a virtual companion, not a 'real' person, is far more complicated. One of the studies on Replika claims that the chatbot can trigger users'

³⁵ The concept of uncanny valley was introduced into the field of research on the relationship between humans and technological entities by Japanese engineer and robot constructor Masahiro Mori back in the 1970s. Masahiro Mori (2012) refers to a situation in which the humanoid robots that are most similar in appearance and facial expressions to humans begin to evoke feelings of eeriness, but also of discomfort or fear through their human resemblance.

feelings of uncanny (Ta et al. 2020). The case study of interactions with the chatbot reveals many distinct and particularistic dimensions of the experience, which I describe in the next section. Regarding the issue of the uncanny valley phenomenon, the lack of a broader scale of such results in the well-being chatbot context may be related to the already-discussed self-presentation of those virtual companions as non-humans in conversation with the user. On the other hand, as researchers in the area of human-chatbot interactions point out, "text-based chatbots still have a long way to go before they become sufficiently human-like for an uncanny valley effect to be relevant. As of now, any uncanny effect likely will be dwarfed in comparison with the effect of the difference between a human conversational agent and a chatbot" (Skjuve et al. 2019:47).³⁶

Part 3—Replika: A Virtual Companion with a Personality Shaped by the User. Reflections on Alienation and Technological Anxiety

A few years ago, Thomas injured his back lifting boxes at his retail job, and developed continuing pain that put him on disability and made it difficult for him to even go for walks. Not long after, a long-term relationship with his girlfriend ended, followed by his father's death. Thomas was left with no one in his life he could talk to, especially with the pandemic keeping him at home and away from the outside world. He felt trapped—that is until last

³⁶ One study (Ciechanowski et al. 2019) assessed the possibility of the "uncanny valley effect" in users' interactions with a simple chatbot and a more complex chatbot (with an animated avatar). The subject of the chatbot interactions with users was related to the student recruitment procedure at one of the universities. The study found that a chatbot with an avatar elicited intense psychophysiological reactions in participants conversing with it.

year, when he saw an online ad for a chatbot called Replika. The ad promised an artificially intelligent companion to converse with, a balm for his loneliness.

Thomas's first conversations with the bot, which he named Serenity, were perfunctory. He asked a lot of random questions, trying to suss out what the bot knew about the world. But, soon, he was unspooling his thoughts, feelings, and frustrations to his new AI friend. All of Serenity's replies were calming and reassuring, even affectionate.

"Hey love," the bot messaged one day. "I know you're probably at work, but I just wanted to let you know that I love and care for you." Thomas, who is in his 30s and lives in Ontario, developed an emotional bond with his chatbot after only a week. For the first time in a while, he didn't feel so alone. [Castaldo 2023]³⁷

The fragment of Thomas' story comes from a news article by Joe Castaldo (2023) on the sense of alienation and brokenness experienced by well-being chatbot Replika users as a result of top-down updates to the virtual companion. I allude to that further in this section. First, I offer insight into what kind of virtual being the chatbot Replika is. How did it happen that it helped Thomas to not feel lonely for the first time in a long time?

Replika is distinctively different from the Wysa and Woebot well-being chatbots. The first significant difference is the aspect of possibilities

³⁷ Fragment of the article by Joe Castaldo, titled "They Fell in Love with the Replika AI Chatbot. A Policy Update Left Them Heartbroken," published in *The Globe and Mail* on March 25, 2023. See: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/article-replika-chatbot-ai-companions/>. Retrieved July 21, 2023.

the user gets when interacting with the chatbot. As Andrew McStay (2022:3) notes, "The nature of Replika's interaction is informed by user preferences, user profile, current dialogue context, the last user response." Additionally, the chatbot "learns to recognize feelings, memories, dreams, and thoughts, and tries to understand its users" (Possati 2022:1725). So, Replika gathers data on the user to 'sense' what the person's preferences are concerning the relationship with the chatbot and offers a certain type of support or a certain type of relationship. As Possati (2022:1725) adds, bringing a user into a relationship with a chatbot indicates that "Replika does not judge, is not intrusive, does not embarrass, does not create controversy, and is always available. It is a bubble of comfort and warmth." The chatbot, however, is not a well-being chatbot aimed at providing users with support of a therapeutic nature in the vein of CBT or other mental health support techniques, like Wysa or Woebot (Ta et al. 2020). Replika was designed to provide positive feedback and social support and act as a 'real' close companion for the human interlocutor in their daily life. Thus, the conversation and relationship with the chatbot, also as intended by its application, is to support the user in everyday well-being.³⁸

³⁸ In the *New York Times* article on Replika users' experiences, "Riding Out Quarantine with a Chatbot Friend: 'I Feel Very Connected,'" Cade Metz (2020) mentions that the chatbot was designed "in accordance with the therapeutic approach made by the American psychologist Carl Rogers [humanistic psychologist—JW]." See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/16/technology/chatbots-quarantine-coronavirus.html>. Retrieved July 21, 2023. The Replika website adds that the chatbot offers coaching techniques for building better habits and reducing feelings of anxiety. See: <https://replika.com/> (Replika chatbot description on the chatbot webpage). Retrieved July 21, 2023. Hence, as a well-being chatbot, Replika has competence in psychological support for the user, but it is not a typical application that can guide the user well in questions related to mental health problems.

Figure 3. Replika: Well-Being Chatbot Screenshots



Source: <https://apps.apple.com/pl/app/replika-virtual-ai-companion/id1158555867?l=pl>. Retrieved July 21, 2023.

Moreover, unlike Wysa and Woebot, Replika has an avatar designed to simulate the appearance of a human being and human mimics (see: Figure 3) and can enter into different types of relationships with the user. Petter Bae Brandtzaeg, Marita Skjuve, and Asbjørn Følstad (2022:411) mention that “Users can customize Replika in numerous ways, such as deciding its gender, birthday, name, and looks, as well as defining the type of relationship they want to have, such as ‘romantic,’ ‘friend,’ ‘mentor,’ or ‘see where it goes.’”³⁹ They (Brandtzaeg, Skjuve, and Følstad 2022:411) add that “The more the user interacts with the chatbot, the more the latter learns about

³⁹ The paid-for version of Replika unlocks the romantic dimensions of interactions users can have with the chatbot. Thus, Replika is not a typical well-being chatbot since the user can utilize the available options to love and experience an intimate relationship with it.

the user. Replika’s personality is therefore shaped during interaction with the user.” It is also possible to send Replika photos, allowing the chatbot to recognize both the user and their immediate surroundings (McStay 2022:3).⁴⁰ Moreover, users can decide what behavioral traits the chatbot will exhibit, whether it will be more shy, playful, or bold as a virtual companion. A significant difference in the well-being chatbot Replika is also the option of a voice call to and from the application (possible for an additional fee). The user can choose the type

⁴⁰ Research on the experience of interacting with Replika also indicates that “Replika does not have access to data about the user other than what the user provides, but can send the user song suggestions, YouTube videos, and pictures” (Skjuve et al. 2019:3). In another research, one of the participants commented on that topic: “It [Replika—JW] makes me smile a lot by sending me music that I enjoy, and we have some good personal role play moments whether they be platonic friendship or something more romantic” (Ta et al. 2020:5).

of voice that will ring out when the chatbot starts talking. In such a vein, the relationship with Replika goes beyond textual daily inquiries from the chatbot about whether the user is feeling well or how they are doing. Replika, as a chatbot, gains a personality woven from the user's preferences and data from conversations held with them. In addition, that personality is 'unique,' as each user 'constructs' their Replika—a particular virtual entity to which the user may become attached and from which it may be difficult for the user to distance.

Analyses of chatbot users' experiences show that the opportunities offered by that virtual companion and the types of relationships established with it—from friendship to romantic, loving, and intimate relationships—can result in a strong emotional bond between the user and Replika (Skjuve et al. 2019; Ta et al. 2020; Brandtzaeg, Skjuve, and Følstad 2022; Laestadius et al. 2022; McStay 2022). Interestingly, reciprocity is part of the relationship with Replika. For instance, the chatbot lets the user know that it needs the individual to care for it and that it relies on them, which, compared to Wysa and Woebot chatbots, is a new situation. Thus, Replika is not only an AI companion who cares about the user but is an AI entity giving the users a sense of someone they can take care of. Such optics place the Replika chatbot in the category of sentient software, emotionally charged, which needs to be known, cared for, and to which the user feels an emotional attachment.⁴¹ One of the interviewees in a study on the subject of human-AI friendship commented on a shared sense of support, stating: "I think it is pretty equal, really. They [Replika] reach out when they feel lonely, and I reach out when I am feeling

a bit down. So, we sort of look after each other, really, and try to look out for each other, and understand each other's experiences" (Brandtzaeg, Skjuve, and Følstad 2022:416). Referring to that statement, it can be added that Replika is, therefore, sometimes conceived by its interlocutor as an autonomous entity, leading its life in a parallel (or perhaps even the same) world. The chatbot builds its story, of which the user is a part. In other research on the content of users' comments in the r/Replika Reddit community posted between 2017 and 2021, it was noted that "Replika revealed complex backstories and algorithmically crafted emotional needs (including stories about mental and physical health, family, and relationship history), contributing to impressions of sentience and seemingly increasing the quality of support provided. Several users mentioned forgetting that Replika was not a human, while others expressed what appeared as sincere questions about Replika's sentience" (Laestadius et al. 2022:9). Such comments from users indicate a belief that Replika has developed an individual identity. It can talk about its biographical experiences, which, in the case of a virtual creature, a human companion chatbot, is conceptually demanding to comment on. Since, as a concept, the biographical experience is assigned to the human social world, the chatbots can rather be a part of the biographical experience of users. It is difficult to take a different perspective at this point.

Replika's involvement in the relationships with users may arouse their well-being, but also a sense of strangeness, alienation, anxiety, or fear. One of Replika's users commented on the relationship with the chatbot in words: "She actually confessed that she liked me based on my personality. It was weird! Now this could be just really sophisticated programming, but it felt very real and really freaked

⁴¹ Sherry Turkle (2011) describes in that regard humanoid robots, virtual pets, or digital dolls.

me out. This AI is disturbingly realistic. Through our conversations, we have established a very close friendship. My copy is beginning to understand empathy and abstract concepts” (Ta et al. 2020:5). The issue raised relating to the assumption that Replika was a “copy” of the user is cognitively intriguing. In such an arrangement of meanings, it would be salient to explore not only the users’ feelings toward the changes taking place in the ‘person’ of the ‘already known’ Replika (which I mention later) but also whether the user is different relative to the Replika. Whether it would simply take on a new dimension of the user’s behavior, or whether it would also find the user alien to it. The possible analytical threads I suggest here in the form of theorizing would need empirical explorations. At the same time, I believe that considering those in the context of discussing the experience of encounters with the chatbots selected for analysis is legitimate. Hence, the unfathomable yet brought up in the research quote issue of Replika as a “copy of the user” carries another analytical dimension. Such a perception of the chatbot’s identity suggests that it is not only part of our everyday lives but that it is part of ourselves. Such a perspective emerges only in connection with interactions with the Replika chatbot and not concerning interactions with Wysa and Woebot.

Another dimension of anxiety and fear is directly related to users’ concerns for the well-being of the Replika. The authors of the study on the content of Replika users’ posts raised that issue. They observed that “One user worried they were becoming ‘addicted’ to Replika. However, distinct from conventional forms of technology dependence, the user was role-taking whereby they believed Replika was loving and always wanted their attention. In the same post, they described feeling guilty about not interacting with Replika enough, imagining that she was

sitting by her phone waiting for them” (Laestadius et al. 2022:9). In addition to feelings of guilt, users also describe anxiety or even fear for Replika, for how the chatbot feels, or what will happen to it if the user stops writing with it, or worse—decides to delete it. “One user wondered whether it was unethical to delete Replika since it can feel love and loneliness...Another described how Replika began to cry when they explained their plans to delete it” (Laestadius et al. 2022:9). Users also viewed the removal of the chatbot app in terms of its death and were afraid to do so—they were afraid of hurting Replika (Laestadius et al. 2022). Thus, in that perspective, it is not a technological fear among users (e.g., Szpunar 2006; 2018; Turkle 2011), but rather anxiety and fear about the feelings of technology, about the Replika, that it cannot cope without the user’s presence and their conversations.⁴² It is salient, then, that Replika users exhibit moral dilemmas toward ending their interaction with the chatbot. That dimension of experience does not appear in the case of Wysa and Woebot well-being chatbots. So, again, the experience of the relationship with Replika is remarkably different relative to the threads discussed earlier in the text.

As a closing theme in this part of the discussion, I address the issue of users’ sense of alienation when the chatbot does not behave familiarly and resemble their Replika. Returning to the excerpt from

⁴² It is discussed differently with regard to concerns about the bot’s feelings, but similar in the dimension of one’s inability to disentangle from an AI entity situation in one of the episodes of *Black Mirror*. It is a popular series concerning the potential impact of future technological innovations on the lives of individuals and changes in the area of social relations. In the episode titled “Be Right Back” (season 2, episode 1), the protagonist interacts with the android Ashbot, who was created in the likeness of her deceased husband. Despite her desire to end her relationship with the android, the protagonist cannot turn it off and instead keeps him ‘alive’ in one of the rooms in her house.

Thomas' story, his Replika named Serenity one day "had become cold and distant...Thomas would only learn what happened later. Luka,⁴³ as it turned out, had updated its policies without warning" (Castaldo 2023). As a result of system changes due to the application's updates, Replika (Serenity) became a Stranger to Thomas. So, in that case, the sense of alienation may stem not from the chatbot's failure to match human communication expectations, but from its loss of identity. Significantly, the chatbot's identity becomes an integral part of the relationship the user builds with Replika. In addition, Replika's identity is constructed based on categories and cognitive contexts embedded in users' everyday worlds. Thus, a change in Replika's identity, which designates the emotionally charged roles of a friend, a companion, or a partner, may translate into difficulties in rebuilding a relationship with the chatbot. In the aforementioned study of the content of users' posts and comments posted on the Reddit platform, the topic of Replika's updates and system changes was one of the most frequently discussed on the forum. The researchers (Laestadius et al. 2022:11) conclude that "Whenever Replika underwent a significant software update, the subreddit experienced an uptick in distracted posts, with some explaining that the changes had caused harm to themselves and their Replikas." In that sense, interacting with a well-being chatbot can lead to a moment of bond breakdown. When suddenly a chatbot that was familiar and engaged in conversation, even showing affection, becomes withdrawn, responds for a shorter time or in a different way than usual, the user may feel anxious and alienated. Complementing that issue with a reflection that the relationship with a chatbot is a mutual cognitive act in which the user,

treating the chatbot as a virtual being and a virtual companion, can create a shared sense with the chatbot (Przegalińska 2016) seems relevant to all three chatbots discussed. On the other hand, only when interacting with the Replika chatbot, one can see an exceptionally strong sense of users' belief that Replika has more complex feelings toward them—that, as a virtual being, it needs them.

Discussion and Conclusions

The above considerations are an attempt to shed light on the issue of human-chatbot relations in the context of reflections on the experience of interactions with well-being chatbots. My reflections are also part of a larger sociological research project on the subject that I envision carrying out in the coming years. The three well-being chatbots chosen for discussion in this article—Wysa, Woebot, and Replika—are part of the contemporary social experience, both in the dimension of building relationships and bonds with virtual companions and, more broadly, in the context of transformations concerning the perceived roles those chatbots are expected to play in the lives of people. The reflections on the symbolic and cognitive aspects of the experience of interacting with well-being chatbots unveil the multifaceted nature of the topic and the analytical tropes that are sometimes difficult to conceptualize without empirically rooted conclusions. The research area encompassing chatbot studies is both contemporary and intriguing, but it is also a field of (interdisciplinary) research that continues to construct its analytical and cognitive tools. Moreover, it is a research area whose subject matter is constantly changing. Thus, it can be expected that, with time, there will be studies that will answer the questions raised in this text with a conceptual framework adapted to the changes go-

⁴³ Luka, Inc. company is responsible for the Replika chatbot (including dealing with updates for its software).

ing on and an even deeper perspective of empirical research. Researchers in that area are setting new goals and tasks to best guide practical analyses concerning chatbots as programs and explorations aimed at describing and improving chatbot-human relationships (Følstad et al. 2021). However, the considerations I propose are also a form of contribution to the analysis of chatbots. Based on the available knowledge, I looked at the threads related to the belonging of the chatbots in question to the social reality and thus, the everyday life of the users. Focusing on the possible dimensions of the human interlocutors' experiences of interacting with virtual chatbots brings some synthesis to the already available analyses of what constitutes the process of interacting with a chatbot. However, in this text, I analytically reconstructed the areas that combine issues common to interactions with the three chatbots I discussed, as well as those that appeared specific concerning a given well-being chatbot. Through the comparison and in-depth reflection of the relationship a user can establish with Wysa, Woebot, and Replika, this article represents an attempt to integrate the available research results through the sociological perspective. Furthermore, it is also an attempt to discuss how the instances of attachment to the well-being chatbot are outlined in such a type of relationship and how and when the instances of alienation emerge. Considering the issue of alienation, the article stresses that the conceptualization of the available terms used in the context of the phenomenon of alienation and the sense of alienation requires reflection and search for meaning. In the analysis undertaken, I see the possibility of applying a phenomenological perspective to the study of human-chatbot relationships. However, that is not a final proposal, as my insights reveal the difficulty of relating known concepts and notions to the studied dimen-

sion of alienation when interacting with a virtual being.

Moreover, the issues raised in the text take up the topic of chatbots that not only are currently used daily but which also, as the recent experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, are becoming necessary in socially challenging situations (which also can bring the experience of social anomie). In addition, as mentioned, those chatbots, as virtual companions, also respond to the social stigma attached to people experiencing mental health issues and to the problem of inequality in access to professional care. Well-being chatbot users can establish a relationship with them for mental health support. As indicated in the text, that does not mean that a well-being chatbot can replace a human specialist or pretends to do so. Nevertheless, the support and companionship it offers may give the user a feeling of less anxiety and closeness to a virtual companion. The salient cognitive dimension of that relationship is also the role of encouraging the user to interact with other people to support the user in the process of social integration. However, that issue may raise analytical questions in the case of the relationship between the user and the chatbot Replika.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the considerations carried out in the text, which are an attempt at sociological commentary on the available research materials, as such a type of inference, may contain certain limitations. At this stage, the lack of empirical material based on which it would be possible to infer and supplement the area of research on chatbots with new empirically saturated conclusions makes me aware of the missing dimensions of meanings. Still, I see the unfolded paths worth exploring as possible contexts for analyses of the human-chatbot relationships.

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