Web Series, YouTube, and Politics: Affective and Emotional Dimensions of WIGS Lauren’s User Comments

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Abstract
This study aims to investigate the complex relationship among entertainment contents, networked publics, and politics by offering an overview of literatures in the fields and suggests that the emotional dimensions are the key to understand the political possibilities of mediated public discussion. By analyzing the online comments of YouTube channel WIGS’s web series Lauren, this article reveals that audiences interpret and discuss this web series through mediated feelings of connectedness and thus are able to engage in public debate and political deliberation. I argue that, the connective affordances of YouTube and the emotional realism of the web-drama facilitated the web space of Lauren to function as an “emotional public sphere” where social solidarity was strengthened, political criticism was developed, and political activity could be motivated. Overall, this study reconceptualizes the place of entertainment media in democracy and everyday life and contributes to political communication and feminist media studies.

Keywords
web series, online user comments, emotional public sphere, mediated public discussion, deliberation

Traditionally, political communication scholars have focused on the effects of news and public affairs programs on public opinion and informed citizenship, but rather ignored or downplayed political implications of entertainment content because it does not conform to a “classic liberal conception of rational exchange” (Curran, 1996, p. 102). However, some scholars have started to interrogate the inherent arbitrariness of the distinction between news and entertainment in the contemporary media environment. In this context, many scholars initiated to examine the ways in which some politically relevant entertainment contents enable audiences to learn about politics, formulate opinions on public issues, express their political identity in relation to media text, and imagine ideal political situations and practices (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2009).1

With the rapid development of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), another significant area of interest for political communication scholars is about the potential of online space with regard to the political deliberation or participation (Janssen & Kies, 2005; Lerman, 2007). In particular, some scholars are interested in online user comments, a standard feature of the web 2.0 which is generally provided by online news sites and social media platforms, and their political implications (Ernst et al., 2017; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). User comments appear below the various kind of online content to express users’ emotions or opinions, add information, to correct inaccuracies, or to give personal perspectives (Stroud, Duyn, & Peacock, 2016).

Both fields, one who contends the political implications of entertainment contents and the other who advocates that online user comments could promote political discussion, recognize the emotional deficit in contemporary political communication. Despite the “affective turn” in the 1990s, the rational approach of citizen and deliberative democracy influenced by Habermas (1989) had remained strongly in journalism and political studies. However, several scholars argue that affects and emotions are central to democratic politics and may even motivate political action (Lunt & Pantti, 2007; Papacharissi, 2016; Richards, 2004; Van Zoonen, 2005). These scholars coming from different disciplines such as cultural studies, political communication, and social movement studies have greatly influenced this study.

In this context, this article investigates the complex relationship among entertainment contents, networked publics,2

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and politics by offering an overview of literatures in the fields and examining a case study that analyzes the online user comments of YouTube web series WIGS Lauren. A web series is commonly defined as a series of scripted or nonscripted videos, generally in episodic form, appearing only on video uploading Internet sites that are normally no more than 30 min in length (Kassabian, 2017). Not only is web series a popular alternative to traditional TV and cable series production due to the accessibility and affordability of high speed Internet, web series is also the perfect example of the convergence of online space and entertainment contents. In other words, networked publics could easily “traverse” between watching and commenting, thus accelerating socio-political conversation (Brundidge, 2010). This is the very reason why this study chose YouTube channel WIGS’s web series for the case analysis.

By analyzing the online comments of YouTube channel WIGS’s web series Lauren (season 1), this article questions (1) which themes and topics are brought up in the user comments, (2) what political implications those comments reveal, and (3) how, in which conditions, was this possible. In other words, my research question centers on the political possibility of mediated public deliberation in online entertainment audience discussion space and how this process works—that is, what enables these audiences to become publics to deliberate substantive political concerns. I argue that, the emotional realism of the web-soap and the connective affordances of YouTube allowed the networked audiences to engage in mediated public discussion and debate through sharing mediated feelings of connectedness, solidarity, and community. Moreover, the article suggests that the web space of Lauren showed the potential to function as an “emotional public sphere” where social solidarity was strengthened, political criticism was developed, and political activity was motivated. By “emotional public sphere,” I refer to a broader understanding of emotion in the public sphere, including the display of emotion in the public sphere, emotional expressions in deliberate discourse, emotional engagement as a means of entering the public discussion, and the mediated feelings that sustain the affective publics. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature by connecting the two different areas of research, political implication of entertainment contents and online user comments, and stressing the significance of affect and emotion in both the areas. Overall, this study introduces the new genre of web series and conceptualizes it in democracy and everyday life.

Complicating Popular Culture and Politics, Audience and Public

Political communications scholars, practitioners, and consumers are experiencing the rapid eroding of the walls between popular culture and politics distinctions due to “the changing communication technologies, the new economics of mass media, and broader cultural trends” (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001, p. 161). Due to this blurring of boundaries between traditional news and entertainment, some scholars even started to examine new ways of approaching the media sphere; a shift from categorizing by genre, content, or source to categorizing by “politically usefulness” (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001). Within these politically relevant media frames, Lance Holbert (2005) provides nine types of political entertainment which base on the explicit versus implicit level of political messages and the degree of viewer’s expectation on political issues. Liesbet Van Zoonen (2005) also offers the typology for political fiction by clarifying narratives that are often used in popular film and television, such as the quest, conspiracy, and soap narratives. Extant works in this area have focused on a wide range of policy areas, such as women’s rights, environment, gun ownership, gay marriage/legal rights, and the death penalty. For instance, Andrew Holbrook and Timothy Hill (2005) argue that agenda setting and priming effects apply as equally to entertainment media as they do to traditional political information sources like news since entertainment media impact on public discourse and fire the public imagination.

This change indicates that a sharp opposition between public and audience cannot be sustained, but rather a more fluid and contingent assessment is in need (Corner, 1995; Dahlgren, 2003). As John Corner (1995) reconceptualizes audiences as “citizen-viewers” as recognizing the civic significances of audience activities, Peter Dahlgren (2003) views politics within more encompassing “civic culture” and articulates “civic” as a kind of pre-political sphere emphasizing the process and contextual dimension. Sonia Livingstone (2005), by proposing a mediating domain of “civic culture,” explores the complicated and connected relationship between audience and public. These studies suggest that contemporary audiences can be seen to be thinking, deliberating, and even participating with popular films and television fictions which enable them to better learn about politics and imagine ideal political practices (Van Zoonen & Wring, 2012).

In this regard, television studies scholars have been investigating the social and political significance of talk shows on television from the 1990s. Much of this academic literature argues that the talk show genre emerges as a context for public debate and contributes to public participation, deliberation, and public expression. Talk shows have been not only a site of entry for marginalized subjects into public conversation (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994; Shattuc, 1997), but also a site where emotion is placed over and above rational deliberation since it usually emphasizes the personal and intimate narrative (Gamson, 1999). Along this line, some scholars suggest that talk shows can construct some kind of “emotional public sphere” that parallels the rational critical public sphere in the way that it “encourages, manages, and reflects upon emotional conflict in a public context” (Lunt & Stenner, 2005).

This study is greatly influenced by the research on the potential of talk shows as “emotional public sphere,” and
Affects and Emotions in Political Communication

In the late 1990s, a number of scholars began to explore the emotional dimensions of mobilization and demobilization. Emotion has been viewed as pathological, nonrational, illogical, crazy, fanatic, childish, feminine, and stupid by modernist scholars. Also, emotion in social movements has been considered dangerous, destructive, and unruly in connection to the crowd and the masses (Gould, 2010). However, with the emotional turn in the field, emotion is viewed instead as a motivational force and a crucial means by which “human beings come to know and understand ourselves and our contexts, our interests and commitments, our needs, and our options in securing those needs” (Gould, 2010, p. 23). Moreover, due to the weakening of the boundaries between politics and popular culture and as popular culture is mainly about feeling and experience, “emotionalism” is transforming the context for political communications (Richards, 2004, p. 340).

Scholars have articulated specific emotions which could function usefully in developing political communication. For example, many empirical scholars have stated that “anxiety” can facilitate political information seeking and learning (Marcus & MacKuen, 1993; Valentino, Hutchings, Banks, & Davis, 2008). The feeling of “connectedness” and “empathy” has been mostly discussed in the broader goal of approaching democratic society (Curran, 1996; Inthorn, Street, & Scott, 2012; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011; Zillmann, 1991). These studies commonly suggest that the emotional ability to associate with the interests of often distant others and imaginatively explore what it is like to be other is the key resource for civic culture. Then, scholars in the field of social movement argue that “anger,” affective state of acknowledging that something is wrong and should be different, inspire to challenge the social order and question the legitimacy of power, thus fueling protests and struggles for justice (Gould, 2010; Lyman, 2004; Pantti, 2010).

In this context, some scholars emphasize the importance of affect: noncognitive, nonconscious, and nonlinguistic qualities of emotion, for instance, the bodily, visceral qualities of feelings: because these affects can provide understanding for political action and inaction (Gould, 2010). Zizi Papacharissi (2016) stresses how affect provides and amplifies intensity by increasing our awareness of a certain mind or body state that we learn to label as particular feeling and emotion. She argues that networked publics are “mobilized and connected, identified, and potentially disconnected” through expressions of these affects (p. 311). In other words, digital media lend these publics their own distinct “mediational feelings of connectedness” (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 308). However, she acknowledges the ephemeral and transient nature of these affects and thus differentiates between how “affective publics” support connection but not necessarily collective action (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 314). Furthermore, scholars criticize the emotional deficit in the study of public sphere and deliberation (Barnes, 2008; Richards, 2004). Habermas (1989) argued for an ideal formation of consensus which required people to put aside any kinds of institutional and personal interests and values since it could pollute the process of genuine public deliberation. His rational approach of citizen contrasts from the emotional and passionate popular (Richards, 2004) and his public sphere is skeptical of the potential of media institutions to create the conditions for public deliberation (Lunt & Stenner, 2005). However, many theorists have tried to free the public sphere from a limited definition of rational-critical debates and argue the inextricable ties between emotion and rationality. For instance, Iris M. Young (2000) criticizes the reliance on “reason,” often defined as neutral and dispassionate, when defining deliberation since it excludes many people such as women and minority. She suggests that recognizing and valuing other styles of speech such as greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling can result in listening to others whose positions and circumstances are different from their own. Along the same line, Marian Barnes (2008) draws on a feminist ethic of care and suggests that emotional experiences and expressions in deliberative forums enhance public participation. Adding to this, some studies invite us to consider talk shows and reality TV as an “emotional public sphere” (Lunt & Stenner, 2005)” or a “mediated public space” (Lunt & Pantti, 2007) that parallels the traditional public sphere and argues against the separation between the public sphere and popular...
culture. Influenced by these studies, I borrow the term “emotional public sphere” to emphasize the emotional dimensions of the mediated public sphere. In addition, Habermas (2006) in his later work moves away from a top-down option of deliberation to a dual conception of deliberation trying to link the normative theory to empirical research. He suggests two critical conditions—a self-regulating media system and anonymous audiences’ feedback between an informed elite discourse and a responsive civil society—for mediated political communication in the public sphere to facilitate deliberative legitimation processes (p. 411).

Method

Material

WIGS is one of the most popular scripted drama channel on YouTube that offers short original adult drama series featuring female leads. Launched in May 2012 by producer Jon Avnet and writer/director Rodrigo Garcia, WIGS targets directly at adult women. WIGS is an acronym for the channel’s tagline, “Where it gets . . .” and the last word gets changed according to a particular series. The channel’s name is meant to address the multifaceted nature of women, who in their daily lives are called upon to wear, metaphorically, many wigs. WIGS have included A-list celebrities, directors, and writers, proving that quality production value and star power can make online contents successful. They even boast intoxicating theme music by multi-Oscar-nominated Thomas Newman. WIGS has released more than 15 drama series, short films, and documentaries so far, and has reached over 268,000 subscribers. It has big name advertisers like Unilever and American Express and partners, such as News corp., for the marketing.

Lauren (season 1), one of the most popular shows in WIGS, is a three-part series (each episode is a maximum of 10 min) written by Jay Rodan, directed by Lesli Linka Glatter, and stars Jennifer Beals as Maj. Jo Stone and Trojan Bellisario as a staff sergeant. Episodes 1, 2, and 3 were released through YouTube on August 13th, 15th, and 17th of 2012, respectively. The series reveals the enormous obstacles and emotional torment that a female soldier confronts in reporting a sexual assault since nobody listens to her or tries to help her. The female sergeant at the end gives up reporting her rape case but remains to stay in the military because she is forced to choose between what she loves and what is right. Although the military system did not offer any solution, she had the opportunity to leak the sexual assault evidence (the videos) to Huffington post and sue the people who raped her. However, her love for military and her allegiance for the country made her final decision to “embrace the suck.” Due to its popularity, season 2 of the show (12 episodes) had been released on May 2013.

This study chose the genre of web series as the case study since it is a good example of studying the political implications of entertainment contents and its user comments. YouTube is the largest video-sharing website and the second-most popular site in the world. Anonymous individuals can access videos, but to add comments to videos, you need to be registered users. Since WIGS channel possesses many subscribers and Lauren is a reality-based drama dealing with controversial issue starring popular celebrities, I believe it is suitable for case study analysis.

Sampling of User Comments

At the time of analysis (December 2012), the total user comments of the series Lauren was 2,032; 1,071 comments from episode one, 313 from episode two, and 648 from episode three. In a first step, I printed out the whole user comments section of Lauren and thoroughly read all of the 2,032 comments. Second, I filtered out all of the unnecessary comments, which had no particular patterns or implications for this study. For instance, around one-tenth of the comments were indicating that users were sent to watch Lauren from a particular person, such as YouTube celebrity Bree Esrig. Then, almost one-fourth of the comments were about the actresses, Trojan Bellisario and Jennifer Beals. Of course, around another one-fourth of the comments were commercial advertisements. Finally, around 800 comments were copied into an Excel sheet for further analysis. Thus, I did not randomly sample the comments but the analysis covered all the comments posted.

Data Analysis

Considering the heterogeneous shape of YouTube user comments, I conducted qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis focuses mainly on “inductively generated categories” and intends to create a “coding schema” that “encompasses a collection of categories” (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). In developing the schema, I surfed through the approximate 800 online comments roughly and tried to connect with some key themes (affect-related, emotion-related, feeling of connectedness, feeling of solidarity, and political criticism) that I found in the research literature. Then, I closely looked at the data (user comments) iteratively to inductively generate categories. Finally, I test these categorizations on further data to see if they can be applied in their current form (see Madden, Ruthven, & McMenemy, 2013). Through this process, the aim is to approach a theoretical saturation whereby new comments don’t reveal any new insights but confirm the already made coding schema. Regarding the context of the online comments, as I mentioned, the people were anonymous individuals who were registered to leave comments about WIGS. There were no time frame limits for leaving online comments to the Lauren, so all the comments were left between August and December 2012. Qualitative content analysis tries to understand the material in-depth and imply a future hypotheses rather than
proving one or rely on fixed category system set up before (Ernst et al., 2017). Since this study is pursued by one researcher (myself), I acknowledge the problem of the “subjectivity of the coding process.”

**Findings**

Based on my sample, I identified eight topics (categories) users discussed in the comment section. These eight categories were found to be applicable to the comments at least 20 times and can therefore be considered as especially relevant. Those eight most important categories I identified in the user comments are the followings: (1) appreciation on the making of Lauren, (2) about the web series genre and particularity of WIGS channel, (3) debate on the role of reality-based drama (especially about Lauren season1 ending scene), (4) relation with timely social issues, (5) criticism on broader sociopolitical issues (including patriarchy, politics, and nationalism), (6) explicitly stating about feminism, (7) Console-ing the characters of the show, and (8) sharing personal stories on similar issue. These topics are exemplified in Table 1.

While most of the comments I analyzed could be categorized into one or two of the categories above, most of the comments in some ways revealed expression of emotion and affect. Since these explicit expressions of affects and emotion such as crying and frustration dominated most of the comments, I purposefully didn’t make this topic as one of the analysis categories. Often, commenters expressed their affects and emotions and continued to state about other things. Rather than explaining the findings of each category, I analyze these categories in relation to research questions.

In analyzing the data, I examined four overarching conceptual areas: political potential of web series, public discussion and political criticism, mediated feelings of connectedness/solidarity/community, and evidence of emerging emotional public sphere. Not only are these areas of concern directly connected to the literatures that I covered, but those conceptual areas also present all of my findings (eight categories) in an effective way. First, by looking at comments that appreciate the making of Lauren (1) and the particularity of WIGS channel (2), I examine the political potential of web series being able to expand sociopolitical awareness in a timely way to broad-ranged audiences. Second, I explore how the user comments were developed into public discussion and political criticism through analyzing findings associated with the debate on the ending scene of Lauren (3), relation with timely social issues (4), criticism on broader sociopolitical issues (5). Third, the comments that consoled the main characters (7), shared personal stories (8), and mentioned feminism (6) were interpreted to reveal mediated feelings of connectedness, solidarity, and community. Finally, I investigate how explicitly expressing affects and emotions in their user comments to WIGS Lauren allowed the audiences to enter into the mediated public discussion and political deliberation, thus forming a sort of “emotional public sphere.”

**Analysis**

**Political Potential of Web Series**

Audiences praised and thanked the stars, directors, and writers of WIGS and felt glad that they produced Lauren. Also, rather than distancing from the series, audiences valued the emotional engagement and emotional explosions they felt watching Lauren. Audiences appreciated Lauren due to three reasons mainly. First, they appreciated the series for expanding social awareness about this sensitive and serious topic. Second, they also judged this series as a high-quality program that is original and fresh. Some audiences mentioned

| Category and definition                        | Examples                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Appreciation on the making of Lauren          | Tough topic. Excellent acting. Pathetic that it’s taken this long to START doing something about it ... but glad things are moving at least. [JR] |
| Web series genre and WIGS channel             | This is the best thing to come out of your series. This writing, acting, cast, set design, research, even sound, are epic. This is what women’s programming should be. Thank you for having the guts to produce this, and for doing it so well [eve] |
| The role of reality-based drama               | I know its (the ending) stupid. It pissed me off. Like idk why they did this. It’s not empowering. [Kitty]                                    |
| Relation with timely social issues            | This is amazingly timely, given the ongoing situation at Lackland Air Force Base. American viewers should read up about Lackland and contact your representatives to push for further investigation. [ntc] |
| Criticism on sociopolitical issues            | It also bothers me that the warning at the beginning is for “sexual content” rather than violence. [scp]                                 |
| About feminism                                | Thank you for exposing the power of feminism and its movement. [MP]                                                                     |
| Console-ing the show characters               | Major Stone. Don’t cry [rs]                                                                                                             |
| Sharing personal stories on similar issue     | I was diagnosed with PTSD as a result of being raped when was young. It angers me that so many women can’t fight back in these situations and if they do it just subjects more of this to them. [O1] |
about the production condition of the web series which is relatively free from regulations and boundaries compared with traditional network and cable TV. The third reason was because audiences felt that the Lauren was a timely program in making the issue of military sexual assault public. Some audiences confessed that they were informed and moved by Lauren and they valued this social awareness and consciousness. Implicitly, they seemed to believe that this feeling of social awareness was the first step for a big change in society. It is true that good expressions of politics in popular culture have achieved a political awareness that other means of communication rarely created; for example, national traumas have been more easily told through the format of a moving soap opera than through the factual means of journalism (Ash, 2000):

[slyk] That was incredible. I’m so glad that you’re making these video to get people to talk about this.

[ewr3] This is the best thing to come out of your series. This writing, acting, cast, set design, research, even sound, are epic. This is what women’s programming should be.

[TRo] This is real strong acting. I’m always glad when actresses and directors lead an audience’s attention to those serious problems people are too ignorant to think about.

[BK] The series spreads awareness and awareness brings about action and action brings about change.

[crzytvr] Really loving WIGS for bringing light to this issue right now.

New media technology has played a critical role in the process of production, distribution, and reception of the web series Lauren. It is true that Lauren could have been produced the way it is since it was a web series on the YouTube channel WIGS. This contentious topic of US military would not have been accepted in network television from the beginning. Although it would have been possible, it would have less possibility of being directed by a woman director or starred by two strong female leads. The fact that half of WIGS’ directors are women is sharply contrasted by the number of women directors existed in 2010–2011 prime-time television (Lauren, 2012). Also, reports tell that famous actors and actresses choose this kind of web content even though they are only paid little since they can be independent without interruption from the network, tell the stories they want to tell, and have a more intimate experience with the viewers than other medium (Hurwitz, 2012). Regarding distribution, different kinds of new media, such as YouTube, Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter facilitated viewers to reach Lauren which expanded the range of audience.

Moreover, the fact that WIGS was working together with SWAN (Service Women’s Action Network) implies an important political opportunity. SWAN is a civil rights organization founded and led by women veterans and their vision is to transform military culture by securing equal opportunity and the freedom to serve in uniform without threat of harassment, discrimination, intimidation, or assault (Watson, 2012). While SWAN promoted WIGS’ Lauren through their website, blogs, and personal emails, WIGS donated 50 cents per every new subscriber to SWAN. WIGS also donated the proceeds from the sale of WIGS logo tote bags to SWAN. Anu Bhagwati, executive director and cofounder of SWAN, states in an interview that while Lauren may be scripted it provides “a realistic, compelling portrayal of the many different issues surrounding sexual violence in the military” (Watson, 2012). Likewise, as user comments suggest, the particular genre of web series with the production team’s political intent enabled WIGS Lauren to raise social awareness of the sexual violence in the military to the networked public.

Public Discussion and Political Criticism

The web comments and debates of Lauren illuminate how people imagine and connect the social reality and mediated drama. In other words, audiences were interested in the role of reality-based drama in society and often discussed about this. When the episode three (the last one) came out, many audiences disputed about the ending of Lauren, whether it should have fulfilled the fantasy of justice or it was better to remain real (the female sergeant “embracing the suck” and remaining in the military not reporting the rape incident). There was nothing sergeant’s major or superior could do for her case since one of the suspects was the grandson of a four-star general. Because in episode 1 the sergeant argued that she would do what is right and she was firm and strong, audiences expressed that she would find justice at the end. When the opposite happened, audiences expressed that they felt a sense of betrayal to the series and were angry and frustrated. Yet, some people admitted the frustrating reality and were satisfied with Lauren’s realistic ending than an idealistic ending. One thing that is true was because of this shocking ending, a lot of people participated in the discussion on the online board of Lauren either expressing rage or supporting the ending:

[d1220] It might be for the best to have it end like this. If Lauren had sent in the video, people just would have said “Good for her.” This ending gets people angry and that gets them talk about the issue.

[MR.] No. The ending is brilliant. It shows how even the strongest can be broken when submitted to a situation like this one. This Shit Happens.
Arguments continuously: up to quite long dialogues since several people exchanged another heated discussion. These conversations were made to build a critical eye on it. Discourse on rape was increased information and awareness about military system assault. However, their dispute encouraged other people to increase social awareness about this incident and made people rethink about it. Moreover, an audience raised the news of LeVena Johnson, another rape and murder incident in the military which occurred in 2005 and was made as a documentary film in 2010, and attached a link to the video content about it:

[ntdc] This is amazingly timely, given the ongoing situation at Lackland Air Force Base. American viewers should read up about Lackland and contact your representatives to push for further investigation.

[ad2] I’m in the AIR FORCE guard (10 years); read about Lackland female basic trainees. Trust me when I say that some men will prey on the opportunity of your weakest moment. There is a culture of sexism in the military and the only reason I stay in, is to enforce change.

[SMN] Hearing this story of LaVena Johnson made me revisit this web series. Glad I did. Really appreciate the writing and acting! Big thanks to the producers!

Furthermore, critical views on politics, gender roles, patriarchy, and nationalism were produced through online comment space of Lauren. Throughout the comments, there were several severe debates on military system. Audiences who were actually serving in the military had fierce controversy on the real situation of the military system on sexual assault. However, their dispute encouraged other people to increase information and awareness about military system and to build a critical eye on it. Discourse on rape was another heated discussion. These conversations were made up to quite long dialogues since several people exchanged arguments continuously:

[LDG] Don’t tell your daughters to not step out in the night, instead teach your son!

[HaUTV] Love how they show how life is not fair! Be a grandson to a 4star General and you are untouchable.

[HeaGaV] Rape is not the way people DEAL with trauma! It CAUSES trauma!

[kbo] What bothers me about situations like this in real life many people react saying this is a reason women should not be in the army. What this really should indicate is to have more respect for the men and women that fight beside you.

[sop] It also bothers me that the warning at the beginning is for “sexual content” rather than violence. Thought that might have some implications for the way we think about rape.

[JR] If this were men getting fucked in the ass by their fellow soldiers they way women are being raped then there’d be a HELL of a lot more done about it. But because we’re women, and on some sick level men believe that they have a right to do this to us, we’re not only told to but EXPECTED to just take it, suck it up, and deal.

Likewise, these personally grounded discussion of Lauren’s audience reflects socially relevant and critical questions related to institutional injustice and sexual harassment. In that sense, I argue that the user comments on political criticism and public discussion reveal the possibility of civic culture and the potential of public deliberation in this space.

Mediated Feelings of Connectedness/Solidarity/Community

Interestingly, many audiences connected to the main characters of Lauren with intimate relationship and treated them as their close friends. While not many of the viewers experienced the military system or were familiar to these incidents, they seemed to feel a kind of “emotional realism” (Ang, 1985) which indicates that a realism experienced by viewers of Lauren is on an emotional level such as sharing a structure of feeling. Moreover, audiences could imagine a parasocial relationship (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985) between the characters of Lauren and themselves thus even making conversations through the comments; consoling and counseling the characters:

[rady] Major Stone. Don’t cry.

[Stana] This episode is eye opening. I hope she gets counseling, but also that she does something more.

[L] Wow Spencer & Betty in the same scene! Ok. . .I watch too much TV.

[Anime] I just kept seeing her as Spencer.

Some audiences confessed their wounds and pains from similar experiences of Lauren. Through disclosing their personal stories and consoling the character of the Lauren, it seemed that the audiences were healing themselves by forming social solidarity. That is, the online comments of Lauren...
produced and strengthened social solidarity and facilitated healing process for each other:

[B] I have been assaulted by a member of a family. This happens and it hurts. I wish I was as strong as Lauren and could speak up about what has been done.

[OY411] I was diagnosed with PTSD as a result of being raped when was young. It angers me that so many women can’t fight back in these situations and if they do it just subjects more of this to them.

Richards acknowledges this point and argues that a mediated fiction brings a “therapeutic” culture where emotional “reflexivity” is realized (Richards, 2004). Although I cannot confirm the gender of the commenters since it is an online space, to some extent it is true that there existed a thickened solidarity among women who had similar experiences of sexual assault. Some of them were women who had served or still serve in the military, others were situated in different environments and social situations. Also, some of them replied to others’ comment by acknowledging their pain and empathizing with them:

[fflap] I cried throughout this. My COC was the same, except a male CO instead of female. Standing for 8 months next to the guy that did it and finally have been given the ok to miss drills and my MEB packet has been filed. It has been the hardest time of my life.

[Funne] Thank you for making this, I was assaulted my first tour to Iraq 2003. Never reported it which at times I regret. But I as a soldier I would not trade my time in the military. I keep my female soldiers close and informed and would never treat them as this Major treated the SSG.

[MoL] I was never in the military, but was brutally raped by my own 1st husband. If your Married you also CANNOT press charges. I’m very sorry this happened to you NO woman should have to endure this & As a wife of a retired soldier, a granddaughter of a WW2 Soldier, I’m appalled that This Still happens.

[Cara] Luna, I am sorry your 1st husband did this to you. I just want to let you know that women don’t have to press charges anymore, the state does it. That goes for any kind of abuse. They used to let men get away with it because “they had the right.” My mom went through the same thing.

[MeV] It happened to me in the navy. I won my case and they had gotten 3 months of brig time and were forced to retire. However, they still got their benefits but they stripped me of mines and I didn’t even do anything.

Although the WIGS channel is not officially identified as a feminist project, Avnet and Garcia expressed in an interview that they intended to target “women over 25 who were an underserved demographic on the Internet” and “create shows that the women in our lives would really like” (Dowling, 2013). Living up to their expectations, user comments of Lauren definitely show a mediated sense of connectedness among the women. Some people explicitly named this feeling of community as “feminism” and viewed WIGS and Lauren as feminist contents. For other people who were reluctant about being regarded as feminists, they did not use the term feminism, but still articulated the feeling of solidarity as being women through comments. As you can see in the quotes below, some comments showed conflicts between male and female audiences since there were some indications about their gender in the nicknames and comments. However, I do not intend to essentialize women into a category or generalize the gender conflicts. Rather, my focus is on the aspect of how feelings of connectedness provoked through watching Lauren offered the audiences to imagine and create social solidarity among them:

[jusme] It hurts me to watch this series and know that this is the story of so many of our women in arms.

[MP] Thank you for exposing the power of feminism and its movement.

[Z28ca] You have a lot of growing up to do at 25yrs old. For once a women’s perspective showing the consequences of reporting the sexual assault.

[no name] Powerful! It’s about time for this to get public. It’s not the US military, it’s not every single country’s military, it’s a women struggle no matter where we live and work.

[SXO] Truthfully, I never even really gave this problem a thought. Feeling for all of the military women that have experienced situations like this (exposed or not exposed). Hopefully they feel justice now that it’s finally coming to light.

James Curran (1996) argues that media fiction promotes empathy and understanding that enable people to explore imaginatively what it is like to be other. Then, finding others with similar experiences can create a sense of being part of a community (Taylor, 2000). Along this line, Inthorn et al. (2012), developing Dahlgren’s “affinity” which is one of the resources for civic culture, argue that political engagement may be informed by the feeling of belonging to a wider collectivity. They emphasize the emotions that often make individuals associate with the interests of distant others. Most of all, this feeling of solidarity and community is significant in the making of public sphere. In this regard, the next section will explore how the online comments space of Lauren could function as a kind of emotional public sphere and how the audiences of Lauren could enter into mediated public discussion of political concerns.

Evidence of Emerging Emotional Public Sphere

Throughout the comments of Lauren, the most frequently used expression by audiences was how “intense” and “powerful”
the series was to them. Audiences used these two terms not only to describe how much they were moved emotionally but also at the same time to delineate how much the series was qualitatively superb. Normally, most of the comments, whether categorized by any other topics, started with expression of affect, the intensity of their emotion which is often noncognitive, nonconscious, and nonlinguistic. Many confessed that they cried, and some included more of bodily and visceral expressions like “feeling sick to the stomach,” “chills me to the bones,” and “got goosebumps.”

[AK] OMG that was soo intense! I didn’t watch the trailer so it was a great surprise storyline and DEF the BEST one yet! . . . thank you for your Service Ladies.

[t52l] I am truly grateful. Cause this is fucking intense and nothing like anything I’ve seen on youtube so far.

[papoo] Again, this was worth the wait! All of the actors are intense and believable. Lots of tension and emotion. Great writing . . . keep it coming.

[It13] ‘Baby I did right’ I don’t know why, but that line makes me tear up every single time, and I’ve watched this video about 20 times. This show is amazing and absolutely powerful.

[la] “baby I did right,” I did right’<<<<<<<<< GOOSE BUMPS. god I love Troian.

[MNorman] I’ve just been crying through the entirety of parts one and two. It brings back my experiences being raped viscerally.

Through expressing these affects, audiences disclosed strong emotions, such as anger and frustration about the topic of Lauren, rape in the military and the unjust process in dealing with it. They were angry about the injustice and the power system of military and at the same time they were frustrated about the reality. Especially, when the episode three (the last one) came out, this anger was moved onto the ending of Lauren: the female sergeant “embraced the suck” and remained in the military not reporting the rape incident. Since YouTube space is anonymous and lacks regulation, people often used strong swear words to reveal their emotion. However, more often, the emotion of anger and frustration led to critical eyes of the military system, gender inequality, and unfair power relationships as shown in the analysis section of public discussion and political criticism. In other words, these strong affective moments allowed these individual audiences of WIGS to talk actively about what is wrong and should be different, thus inspiring to challenge the social order and question the legitimacy of power (Gould, 2010). Definitely, these online comments demonstrated a mediated public discussion. Moreover, anger and frustration was associated with the feeling of connectedness and community:

[CG] I cried so much with this series!!! It makes me so angry to know people don’t care!

[togirl] What the fuck?! Not even finding the words. Where is the freaking justice? And they’re fighting for the American peoples. The hypocrisy.

[ranes] It disgusts me that women sacrifice their lives for their country and just end up being raped by their male counterparts.

[Fey8] There is a special place in Hell for rapists. It enrages me to no end.

[redts] She needs justice! What happened to setting an example for her daughter, doing what’s right? Arghghgh so frustrating.

Anger has been characterized as an “indispensable political emotion” meaning that it carries a political value in the capacity to communicate that an injustice has been committed, and through it, question the legitimacy of power (Lyman, 2004, p. 133). Anger is a response to something that is felt to be unfair or damaging (Pantti, 2010). In this context, I argue that despite the anonymous and deindividuated characteristic of YouTube and the liminality of emotion in online spaces, the emotional arousal of web series provided the potential of online user comments of YouTube as a channel to foster democratic deliberation. To put this in different words, Lauren creates a “mediated feminist public sphere”, which serves dual functions; “internally it generates a gender-specific identity grounded in a consciousness of community and solidarity among women; externally it seeks to convince society of the validity of feminist claims, challenging existing structures of authority through political activity and theoretical critiques” (Felski, 1989, p.168).

Scholars have argued that emotions are crucial for the public sphere because of their role in the formation of social solidarities: collective identities that make communities possible are built on shared emotions (Pantti, 2010). An emotional public sphere is not separate from the traditional, rational public sphere of political processes in that it provides opportunity for social solidarity, political criticism, and social movement (Lunt & Stenner, 2005). However, emotional public sphere stresses on the emotional dimension in the public sphere such as the emotional engagements and emotional expressions. In this sense, the mediated feminist public sphere created by Lauren would be an emotional public sphere where emotional engagement with the web series and emotional responses of networked publics provide an essential basis for entering into the political realm (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2001). Similarly, these findings are directly related to the concept of a feminist ethic of care which approaches the public sphere by stressing “empathetic and contextualized judgements of the actions of others, and which contrasts with the valorization of principles-of-judgement, and of rational-critical discourse” (Couldry,
Livingston, & Markham, 2007, p. 10). I suggest that the anonymous individuals who commented in YouTube after watching WIGS Lauren “felt” and “lived” the ethic of care through an emotional identification with mediated distant others, sometimes through anger and other times through sadness and empathy, and these emotions provide “a route to public connection” (Coughtry et al., 2007). Thus, I argue that emotional experiences and expressions are enhancing public discussion and participation and are critical in deliberative democracy.

Conclusion
It is true that some scholars are still skeptical about the contribution that entertainment contents would make due to several reasons. They acknowledge the blurring of the boundaries, but argue that the significance of this phenomenon is easily exaggerated. For instance, Markus Prior (2007) raises three factors that need thorough examination; he questions if entertainment contents really increase political learning and turnout, how much these politically relevant entertainment contents are produced and utilized, and what kind of people reach these contents. While more grounded empirical studies are needed in this specific area to answer Prior’s concerns, I believe this study contributes to the field in two ways.

First, considering the fact that disaffection from politics among citizens has increased and the voting rates and “news” readers have declined, finding politics meaningful and engaging through entertainment media is no small matter (Jones, 2005). For the people who would otherwise not watch any news at all, a reality-based dramas or documentaries may be the only way to first access sociopolitical information and lessen their fear or hate about it. Second, the convergence of online space and entertainment contents accelerates public conversation which is a critical factor in democratic citizenship (Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005). I argue that networked environment provides a comfortable and personal space for citizens to easily “traverse” (Brundidge, 2010) between reading/watching and discussing and also the possible feelings of connectedness.

This study found that these mediated feelings of connectedness, solidarity, and community are the key for motivating and facilitating these audiences to discuss and debate about the socio-political issues and develop social awareness and political criticism. Mediated through affect and emotion, the social media space of web series could function as an emotional public sphere where productive arguments were fueled, political criticism was developed, and social solidarity was strengthened.

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Notes
1. Different scholars have focused on different genres, various texts and issues in this field; soft news and infotainments, political talk shows and late night comedies, animated sitcoms like The Simpsons, dramas such as The West Wing, and crime dramas, for instance, 24 (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2009).
2. Here, I follow Dana Boyd (2010)’s conceptualization of network publics, “publics that are restructured by networked technologies” (p. 39). This means that they allow people to gather for social-cultural and civic purposes, and help people connect with a world beyond their close relations just like other types of publics, but are unique in the way how people engage with the environments.
3. These are entertainment talk show interviews with politicians, fictional political dramas, traditional satire, soft news, political docudramas, satirical situation comedies, entertainment television events, reality-based programming/documentaries, and lifeworld content.
4. Existing studies examine the effects of user comments on perception of the related online content, user comments as a form of political online participation or as an indicator for the offline political participation, and compare different platforms’ user comments in regard to political discussion (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013).
5. Theorizing emotion and affect lies in an inseparable relationship with feminist theories. Starting with emotional lives and labors of women in the 1980s, feminist scholars continued research on the ‘affective turn’; the place of emotion in the public sphere; the way in which this intrusion of emotion has refocused the feminist mantra ‘the personal is the political’; and the debate on how feelings work toward social change (Gorton, 2009).
6. As of now (September, 2017), the total user comments of Lauren season 1 is 2,666; 1,397 comments. 468 comments, and 801 comments, respectively, for episodes 1, 2, and 3.
7. One interesting aspect of audience comments was that they mentioned a lot about the intertextuality of the actresses. Since Jennifer was famous for her role in The L Word and Troian for Pretty Little Liars, fans kept on calling their character names in the comment.

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