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'Hazy Pop Cultural Memories: An Analysis of the Shifting Reader Receptions of the Prosumer Publishing of Jane Pratt from *Sassy Magazine* (1988-1996) to *xoJane* (2011-2016)

Abstract

This article will consider the publishing legacy of American editor Jane Pratt (b. 1962), both online and off. The American women's lifestyle website *xoJane* (2011-2016) and the print magazine for teenage girls *Sassy* (1988-1996), both of which Pratt founded and edited, serve as the central examples for analysis. Positive audience receptions of *Sassy* are analysed against the more hostile responses to her later digital work. This is in order to understand how Pratt's editorial work has developed in its shift from print to digital, and in audience, from teenage girls in the 1990s to adult women in the 2010s. This comparison is drawn with the aim of exploring shifting attitudes towards reader production. Here, *xoJane*'s prosumer model of digital production is compared and contrasted to *Sassy*'s DIY ethos of reader engagement. Whilst, elements of nostalgic readership that inform Pratt's contested reception are explored. Finally, the impulse for, and limits of, authorial conclusion in digital spaces are considered in Pratt's shifting of her first-person publishing format from print to digital.

Key words: Jane Pratt, *Sassy Magazine*, *xoJane*, magazine studies, digital media studies, feminist media studies, Lauren Berlant, intimate public.

Name: Bethany Rose Lamont

Introduction

Aims, Objectives and Methods

This article will consider the publishing legacy of American editor Jane Pratt (b. 1962), both online and off. The American women's lifestyle website *xoJane* (2011-2016) and the American print magazine for teenage girls *Sassy* (1988-1996), both of which Pratt founded and edited, serve as the central examples for analysis. This is in order to understand how Pratt's editorial work has developed in its shift from print to digital, and in audience, from teenage girls in the 1990s to adult women in the 2010s. This comparison is first drawn with the aim of exploring questions of nostalgia and ageism, in both receptions of *xoJane's* publishing and Pratt's career as a whole. This will then develop into an exploration of shifting attitudes towards reader production, comparing the prosumer model of online engagement in *xoJane* against *Sassy's* DIY ethos of reader engagement. Finally, the impulse for, and limits of, authorial conclusion in online spaces are considered in Pratt's shifting of her first-person publishing format from print to digital. By providing a clear connection between print and digital publications, analysed through the career of a single editor, I hope I can provide an original contribution to the thriving field of feminist digital media studies, and nostalgia studies in media cultures more broadly.

This study asks the question, what does it mean for a generation of readers to grow up with a single editor over several decades through their various publications and projects? How do conceptions of nostalgia for print cultures of the past and cynicism for an imperfect, digitally mediated present influence receptions of Pratt's later work? How has the shift from the print magazines of late 1980s to mid-1990s to the online sites of the early to mid 2010s influenced conceptions of Pratt's publishing spaces as an intimate public sphere for reader engagement? And finally, what can this study reveal about the limits of American feminist confessional cultures in regard to issues pertaining to race and class?

Sassy: A Short History

Sassy was a weekly American print magazine for teenage girls with an alternative pop cultural focus, a feminist lens, and a circulation rate of 450,000 copies that ran from 1988 to 1996.¹ Identifying itself by its progressive politics, Sassy was the first American teen magazine to accept condom adverts and was forthright in addressing taboo subjects around safer sex, HIV and AIDs and gay narratives. The Sassy brand was defined by its playful, self-aware writing style, confessional first-person essays, creative fashion photo shoots and an alternative cultural cache.

The Sassy reader was a demographic of teenage girls and young women, falling under the Generation X umbrella, of those born between 1965-1980, who were largely concentrated in America, where the magazine was published and circulated. The magazine also received a cult following with gay and bisexual men, earning it the nickname of “Sissy.”² Sassy was later rediscovered in the early 2010s, leading to the then teenage fashion and feminist blogger, Tavi Gevinson (b.1996) to found her own American website and publication series for teenage girls titled *Rookie* (2011-2018), which was directly inspired by Sassy’s own unique feminist and countercultural vision, and was launched with the guidance of Pratt herself.³

xoJane: An Introduction

¹ Ed. ‘Stakes Sold In Magazines’, *The New York Times*, 17th October 1989. Accessed 6th February 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/10/17/business/stakes-sold-in-magazines.html>

² Kara Jesella and Marisa Meltzer. *How Sassy Changed My Life*, New York, Strauss & Giroux, 2007. p.63

³ Amanda Fortini. ‘How Sassy Is Tavi Gevinson?’ *The New York Times*, 31st August 2011. Accessed 6th February 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/04/magazine/how-sassy-is-tavi-gevinson.html>

Table 7.1. Issues Discussed in *xoJane*

<i>Topic</i>	<i>2011</i>	<i>2012</i>	<i>2013</i>	<i>2014</i>	<i>2015</i>	<i>2016</i>	<i>Total number of articles</i>	<i>% of total</i>
Reproductive Rights	2	1	4	0	1	3	11	3.67
Fashion	0	1	1	2	0	0	4	1.33
Entertainment	0	0	0	3	0	0	3	1
Audience input	0	0	1	0	1	1	3	1
Education	0	0	0	0	3	0	3	1
Religion	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0.33
Health and disability	4	2	3	8	6	7	30	10
Politics	6	4	1	6	6	16	39	13
Body image	7	5	1	3	5	2	23	7.67
Protest	2	0	0	3	0	1	6	2
Careers and business	3	4	4	0	2	2	15	5
Parenting	1	4	1	2	4	1	13	4.33
Race	5	2	8	10	1	7	33	11
Sexual harassment/ harassment/ abuse	9	10	7	5	6	9	46	15.3
Personal stories	9	10	16	6	12	0	53	17.7
Sex and relationships	2	6	2	2	3	0	15	5
Environment	0	1	1	0	0	0	2	0.67

Figure 1: Claire Sedgwick. *Feminist Media: From the Second Wave to the Digital Age*, London, Rowman & Littlefield, 2020, p.155

xoJane, Pratt's third publication as editor, was a *Time* magazine owned American website for adult women, with an informal blogging style that ran from 2011 to 2016. The site posted roughly a dozen articles per day on subjects ranging from sex and relationships, fashion and beauty, digital cultures and current affairs (see fig 1). Pratt's website reached notoriety for its 'It Happened to Me' series, which published first-person stories of sexual violence and intimate humiliation. Dubbed a "confessional essay farm", the supposed shock factor of these subjects was further enhanced by their sensational headlines, such as 'My Rapist Friendened me on Facebook (And All I Got Was This Lousy Article)', 'My Gynaecologist Found a Ball of Cat Hair in My Vagina' and 'My Former Friend's Death was a Blessing'.⁴ Such concerning content can be located within broader publishing trends in the 2010s. Notably, in 2015, journalist Laura Bennett labelled the online confessional publishing industry 'The First-Person Industrial Complex', a space where narratives of personal trauma, and other distressing, humiliating or deeply intimate experiences, are commodified for mass consumption in online media.⁵

Though the *xoJane* site is no longer available online, its back catalogue of articles has been accessed and analysed using the digital archive, *The Wayback Machine*. However, this resource did not archive the site's comments, a key element to understanding how *xoJane* operates. Instead, comment sections were accessed separately using the blog commenting hosting site, *Disqus*. Online audience responses to *xoJane* such as follow-up think pieces, blog posts and online articles are also drawn upon. This is in order to compare *xoJane*'s reader engagement to Pratt's earlier print venture *Sassy*. The extensive archive of materials was approached using an interdisciplinary close reading method of affect theory, trauma theory, digital media studies, and feminist media studies to understand the interplay of intimacy, nostalgia, conflict and community that underpins Pratt's publishing career both online and off.

⁴ Mandy Stadtmiller, 'xoJane: My Former Website's Death Was A Blessing', *The Daily Beast*, 31st December 2016. Accessed 6th February 2023. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/xojane-my-former-websites-death-was-a-blessing>

⁵ Laura Bennett. 'The First-Person Industrial Complex', *Slate*, 14th September 2015. Accessed 6th February 2023.
http://www.slate.com/articles/life/technology/2015/09/the_first_person_industrial_complex_how_the_harrowing_personal_essay_took.html?

Notably, the subject of *xoJane*, has been drawn upon by Professor Ela Przybylo and Professor Veronika Novoselova, in their 2019 book chapter, 'Blogging Affects and Other Inheritances of Feminist Consciousness-Raising', and by Claire Sedgwick, in *Feminist Media: From the Second Wave to the Digital Age* (2020).⁶ Both texts provide a useful foundation for this study, due to its contextualisation of Pratt's site within a longer overview of feminist consciousness-raising as a whole. However, both Przybylo and Novoselova and Sedgwick use the site as one of a series of examples of online feminist media in their writing, and an in-depth study of Pratt's body of work as a whole has not been undertaken.

1. 'Yes, I'm Exactly Twice as Old as When I Started Sassy': Ageism and Nostalgia in Receptions Of Sassy and *xoJane*

A critical comparison between *xoJane* and *Sassy* is necessary, as the cult-like devotion the original print magazine held was a spectre that clouded not just Pratt's later website, but also "loom[ed] over all the new women's sites [during the mid 2000s to early 2010s] Short-lived and beloved, it was the object of reverent nostalgia, at least among the former teenage girls who'd grown up to work at magazines and post comments on blogs like Jezebel [2007-present, feminist inflected, acerbically toned blog owned by Gawker] and The Hairpin [2010-2018, a general interest site aimed for women writers and readers]."⁷ This resulted in the leading historical overview of the magazine bearing the title *How Sassy Changed my Life: A Love Letter to the Greatest Teen Magazine of All Time*, and spawned such questionable tributes as former *Sassy* cover star Courtney Love's ableist assertion that "If I had *Sassy* [to read when I was younger] I would probably be teaching ret*rded children."⁸ Much like *Sassy* had marked itself against the supposedly mean-spirited and air-headed rival teen magazines of its time, *xoJane* became framed as the evil stepmother of *Sassy*, making an analysis between the two publications particularly pertinent.⁹

⁶ Ela Przybylo and Veronika Novoselova, 'Blogging Affects and Other Inheritances of Feminist Consciousness-Raising', Thomas Waugh, Brandon Arroyo, (eds.) *I Confess! Constructing the Sexual Self in the Internet Age*, London/Chicago, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019.

Claire Sedgwick. *Feminist Media: From the Second Wave to the Digital Age*, London, Rowman & Littlefield, 2020

⁷ Molly Fischer. 'So Many Feelings', *n+1*, 31st January 2012. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/book-review/so-many-feelings/>

⁸ Jesella and Meltzer. *How Sassy Changed My Life*, p. 48.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

1990s nostalgia, ageism and a romanticising of earlier print platforms certainly contributed to the narrative of *xoJane*'s inferiority to the earlier success in *Sassy*.¹⁰ After all, the confessional content and DIY aesthetic of riot grrrl, which *Sassy* associated itself with, may have been derided at the time, but coddled in nostalgia and archived in NYU, it wielded a cultural capital that these more recent online spaces lacked.¹¹ Thus Pratt, so beloved for her teenage-focussed, pop culture inflected, confessional output, found that her ageing persona became a subject of disgust and disappointment:

'Yes, I'm Exactly Twice as Old as When I Started Sassy,' read the title of Pratt's first post, as if she already knew her situation was impossible. Her fans were disappointed that she'd changed but embarrassed to watch her try to stay the same, and worst of all, starting to wonder if she'd ever been that great at all... The cool big sister who relished sharing her expertise had grown up into a woman who feuded with salon receptionists she overheard calling her old.¹²

¹⁰ Grace Evans, 'A Tribute To Sassy Magazine', *Bust*, 29th July 2011. Accessed 6th February 2023. <http://bust.com/general/6628-a-tribute-to-sassy-magazine.html>

Julianne Escobedo Shepherd, 'Fondly Remembering Sassy Magazine's Savage Cover Profiles', *Jezebel*, 21st December 2015. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://pictorial.jezebel.com/fondly-remembering-sassy-magazines-savage-cover-profile-1749131505>

Dodai Stewart, 'Teen Blogger Tavi Longs For Another Sassy Magazine', *Jezebel*, 13th March 2010. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://jezebel.com/5516006/teen-blogger-tavi-longs-for-another-sassy-magazine>

Leonora Epstein, '32 Rad Things You Could Buy From The "Sassy" Magazine Club', *Buzzfeed*, 15th May 2013. Accessed 2nd December 2020.

<https://www.buzzfeed.com/leonoraepstein/32-rad-things-you-could-buy-from-the-sassy-magazine-club>

Leonora Epstein, 'Sassy Magazine's "Twin Peaks" Fashion Spread Is Genius: The Combination of These Two '90s Things is Like Nostalgia Ambrosia', *Buzzfeed*, 13th June 2013. Accessed 2nd December 2020.

<https://www.buzzfeed.com/leonoraepstein/sassy-magazines-twin-peaks-fashion-spread-is-genius>

Nina K. Guzman, 'Sassy Magazine Lives On In This Awesome Tumblr That You Have To See', *Bust*, 12th February 2014. Accessed at 6th February 2023.

<http://bust.com/feminism/11568-sassy-magazine-lives-on-in-this-awesome-tumblr-that-you-have-to-see.html>

¹¹ Lisa Darms, *The Riot Grrrl Collection*, New York, The Feminist Press, 2014. p.1-2.

¹² Fischer, 'So Many Feelings'.

There is a sense of journalistic derision in Pratt's continuing career, an ageist assertion that her editorial projects are an attempt, not to further herself professionally, but rather to bottle a girlhood that never existed. One 2012 piece by the editor and journalist Carl Swanson, profiling Pratt and her new online project, *xoJane*, opens rather cuttingly with the line, "Jane Pratt has been 15 for an awfully long time now."¹³ Pratt is framed not as an experienced editor, but an out-of-date fashion trend. Anna Holmes of *Jezebel* captures this sense of Pratt as a devalued label, in her 2011 comment that, "I don't think she's a brand name anymore...there's a significant portion of the younger generation who doesn't know who she is."¹⁴ Pratt's professional brand hinges on youthful innovation, centring on the narrative of the editor as "the wunderkind who founded *Sassy* when she was 24", and the context that "Pratt comes from an era [1990s American magazine publishing] when editors were kind of famous."¹⁵ This in turn offers an explanation to why the website, *xoJane*, as well as her other projects such as her short-lived television talk show *Jane Pratt* (1992-1993), *Jane Magazine* (1997-2007), the print magazine Pratt founded and edited after leaving *Sassy* and before starting *xoJane*, and her radio show *Jane Radio* (2006) bear her name.

¹³ Swanson. 'Jane Pratt's Perpetual Adolescence'

¹⁴ Zeke Turner, 'Jane Pratt Plots Her Comeback', *WWD*, 23rd March 2011. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://wwd.com/business-news/media/jane-s-big-comeback-helped-by-tavi-3562469/>

¹⁵ Kiri Blakeley. 'Jane Pratt: Everybody's Husband Is Gay', *Forbes*, 17th May 2011. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/kiriblakeley/2011/05/17/jane-pratt-everybodys-husband-is-gay/#1175c2f8ba7f>

However, it is relevant to note that by virtue of being an adult woman, Pratt has always been emphasised as old by the American press. For as Susan Sontag observed “a woman of a certain age...might be anywhere from her early twenties to late fifties”, because “aging is much more a social judgement than a biological eventuality.”¹⁶ A decade and a half before *xoJane*, the write ups are near identical. “Jane Pratt, eternal teenager, tries once again to make herself a brand name”, writes one 1997 feature in *New York Magazine* by the journalist Rebecca Mead. The piece holds an unnecessary amount of space for lengthy descriptions of her age and appearance, with Mead commenting that Pratt was “chic but a little washed out; she seemed tired around the un-made up eyes and looked not a year younger than her age, 34.”¹⁷ Similarly, a 1992 *New York Magazine* profile take equal pains to emphasise the supposedly shocking factor of her age, “Pratt for all her youthfulness will be 30 on November 11th, and up close she has the face of a woman.”¹⁸ The editor is presented as an inauthentic, perhaps even fraudulent figure. Her supposedly mature status, detracting rather than adding to her authority, reflective of what Sontag defines as a capitalist landscape of “ever-increasing industrial productivity” where “youth is a metaphor for energy, restful mobility, appetite.”¹⁹ Certainly, a significant portion of this suspicion and hostility can be attributed to an ageist misogyny that pursued Pratt from her twenties, and extends far beyond the realms of the magazine industry. For as the Age Studies scholar, Margaret Morganroth Gullette, proposes the notion of aging can be constructed as much through “narratives ideas” that are “permeated by the preexisting inventions of culture”, creating a system where “human beings are aged by culture.”²⁰ This is the “age ideology” outlined by both Gullette and Sontag that equates aging with decline, and a woman’s value with her youth.²¹

¹⁶ Susan Sontag. ‘The Double Standard Of Ageing’, in Juanita H. Williams (ed.), *Psychology Of Women: Selected Readings*. New York, W. H. Norton, 1972/1979. p.462, 466

¹⁷ Rebecca Mead. ‘Has Jane Gotten Sassier?’ *New York Magazine*. 15th September 1997. p.50.

¹⁸ Dinitia Smith. ‘Jane’s World!’ *New York Magazine*. 25th May 1992. p.62.

¹⁹ Sontag, ‘The Double Standard Of Ageing’ p.463

²⁰ Margaret Morganroth Gullette. *Aged by Culture*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004. p.11-12

Sontag, ‘The Double Standard Of Ageing’, p.465-466.

²¹ Gullette, *Aged by Culture*, p. 13

However, ageism is not a complete explanation, the power imbalance between a professional adult who has marked children and teenagers as their target audience for profit must still be understood. For as Children's Studies professor, Getrud Lenzer emphasizes, a key part of children and young person's powerlessness is this lack of self-representation. Thus, resulting in a cultural landscape, where "most of what we know about children [and those who are legally children but may not identify as such] has been created by adults."²² Here, Pratt is understood as an unconvincing infiltrator of youth culture that stands in conflict with the material reality of being a young person in the 1990s. As the youth culture author, Molly Gratten, writes of her personal experience of reading *Sassy* as a teenager:

Overall, the pose of ironic detachment that the 30something editor goes for ("Things that are popular, aren't they totally the worst?") is frankly a little creepy. but they also carry the same full-page shampoo advertisement featuring the cast of 90210 that every other teen magazine did. Revisiting *Sassy* as an adult results in my coming to the same conclusion that I did as teenager: like, they are trying so hard to act like they're cool but you know what they're not!²³

²² Gertrud Lenzer. 'Children's Studies: Beginnings and Purposes', *Lion & the Unicorn*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 2001, p.182.

²³ Molly Gratten. 'Sassy: May, 1993', *Lost Classics of Teen Lit: 1939-1989*. 7th September 2012. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://mondomolly.wordpress.com/2012/09/07/sassy-may-1993/>

Similarly, the American feminist punk zine *Ben Is Dead* (1988-1999) dedicated an entire feature article to the ambivalent and openly critical responses to *Sassy* emerging from the countercultural scene of the time. Jennie Boddy, the central author of the feature, describes Pratt as “the plastered-up cake makeup phony” who places *Sassy*’s editorial focus on “self-promoting spin doctors for fashion and bandwagon-jumping”, and “just doesn’t have a clue.”²⁴ Jean Smith of the indie band Mecca Normal, is quoted expressing concern that the teen periodical was “passing themselves off as more progressive than they really are....still judgmental and holier than-thou, telling young women how to look and act.” Whilst, Jennifer Finch, bassist of rock band L-7, places emphasis on the incongruent relationship between its teen marketing and adult staff team, describing *Sassy* as “a bunch of women in their thirties writing a magazine for women in their twenties, who wanna be pre-teens.”²⁵

These suspicious responses are not unreasonable, Pratt’s declaration of herself as “America’s most famous expert and friend of teenagers” is certainly a questionable statement, that asserts an authority that she may not actually possess.²⁶ Whilst, accusations of idealism of youth is not helped by *Sassy* writer Kim France’s argument that the magazine “gave them [the writers and editors] the opportunity to go back and enjoy youth culture without the ugly trappings of youth.”²⁷ Here it would be reasonable to denote that, at times, the editorial work of Pratt projected a greater emphasis on the nostalgic idea of youth than its reality. This is a myth that the public figure of Pratt could simply not live up to, and a point only emphasised as the years went on.

²⁴ Jennie Boddy, with intro by Darby, ‘What Does *Sassy* Mean To You?’ From *Ben Is Dead*, in: Karen Green, Tristan Taormino (eds.), *A Girl’s Guide To Taking Over The World: Writings From The Girl Zine Revolution* St Martin’s Press, New York, 1997. p. 74, 75

²⁵ Ibid. p.74

²⁶ Jane Pratt. *For Real: The Uncensored Truth About America’s Teenagers*. Hyperion, New York, 1995. [blurb of book]

²⁷ Mead. ‘Has Jane Gotten *Sassier*?’ p.50

Such criticisms, of both ageist misogyny and genuine concern of the commodification of youth culture, are brought together in the MTV satirical teenage animation *Daria* (1997-2002). Pratt was satirised in the 1999 episode *The Lost Girls* through a parasitic character titled Val, editor of the fictitious 'Val' magazine (fig.2). Val is drawn with exaggerated line wrinkles around her mouth, eyes and forehead, contrasted against her blonde hair, pink barrettes and girlish outfits such as a mini-skirt and a vest with a childish pink heart on the chest (fig.3).²⁸ Notable character traits include her pre-occupation with artificial trend criteria such as "edginess", delusions of youth, constant name dropping of celebrities, stilted use of slang, and hunger for publicity and profit. Each trait, many of which utilise clearly ageist stereotypes against women, emphasises and exaggerates the disparity between her age and the young girl she markets herself to.

Such characterisation is created with the intention of critiquing the lack of awareness Pratt media had become notorious for; a message that contradicts the feel-good feminist image the editor intended to project. Instead, in *The Lost Girls*, we are presented with a cynical publishing industry, that ignores the reality of young people in favour of a singular, profit driven, vision of what their readership should be. In a key scene, Jodie Landon, a bright Black teenager, who is shown as consistently isolated and tokenised by her white peers, confronts Val on her false vision of female empowerment via commercial publishing:

Jodie - Don't you think 'Val' could try harder to present a multicultural, multi-ethnic, less brain-dead point of view to enlighten girls instead of just marketing to them?

Val - What's your name?

Jodie - Jodie.

Val - Jodie, you've got great sassy energy! Now let me turn it back on you. Pea green nail polish: edgy or icky? What do you guys think?²⁹

²⁸ Some select quotes:

“Was she a little old for that outfit?”

-Quinn

Val: Maybe I should write about cheerleading as the new yoga. Last year I did yoga as the new cheerleading, but I'm ready for a different spin. Pretty good for a 28-year-old, huh?

Daria: Twenty-eight?

Val: I know, I know. People still think I'm, like, 16. When Drew and I go out clubbing I'm always the one who gets carded.

Daria: These clubs -- are they very, very dark?

'The Lost Girls', *Daria*, dir: Gloria De Ponte, Karen Disher, Season Three, Episode Six, MTV, USA, March 24th 1999.

²⁹ Ibid.

It is such earlier examples of misogynistic ageism mixed with genuine material tensions between editor and audience that sets the foundation for ongoing criticisms of Pratt's editorial career, a context that is essential for exploring the reception of her later digital project, *xoJane*.



Figure 2.

Still of 'Val' holding her magazine 'Val' from 'The Lost Girls', *Daria*, dir: Gloria De Ponte, Karen Disher, Season Three, Episode Six, MTV, USA, March 24th 1999.



Figure 3.

Val's contrasting character design of youth and maturity, *ibid.*

2. Digital Nostalgia and Girlhood Narratives in *xoJane*

The brittle relationship between the receding memory of an idealistic print girlhood, and the noisy reality of digital womanhood is expressed revealing through the content of *xoJane* itself. During *xoJane*'s early 2010s publication, social media sites such as Twitter and Instagram were still in their infancy, and smart phones were considered a novelty to their adult audience. There is an earnestness to this approach, which gestures to an earlier more idealistic history of cyberfeminists of the 1990s.³⁰ Here, social media is not a distraction but an exciting creative project for feminist unity."³¹ Yet, despite this often-optimistic outlook, the site is marked by a longing for a time before the internet, entangling with the site's larger mythos of 1990s nostalgia. As the writer Somer Sherwood laments:

It wasn't always like this. Sometimes I get nostalgic for the Before Times (the 90s, of course), when no one had Internet or cell phones. I mean, yes, some people had Internet, but before 1996, no one I knew had it at home.

Maybe to those of you who were wee tots in the 90s, this seems quaint and old fashioned. But every now and then I get this tug of longing in the pit of my stomach for the days when life was not so connected.³²

³⁰ Alison Freer. 'I Tried Living My Life Like Every Fashion Girl on Instagram Ever', *xoJane*, 17th March 2015. Archived version from March 17th 2015. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20150317033501/http://www.xojane.com/fashion/live-like-an-instagram-fashion-girl>

Marianne Kirby. 'Gmail Went Down Yesterday and I Realized How Much I Rely On Technology', *xoJane*, 11th December 2012. Archived version from December 14th 2012. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20121214044415/http://www.xojane.com/tech/my-castle-in-the-icloud-when-gmail-goes-down>

³¹ K. T. Bradford. 'Five Things I Learned After Taking (Almost) 365 Feminist Selfies', *xoJane*, 3rd January 2015. Archived version from August 7th 2016. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20160807093236/http://www.xojane.com/issues/five-things-i-learned-after-taking-almost-365-feminist-selfie>

³² Somer Sherwood. 'Sometimes I Want To Burn Down The Internet And Move Off-Grid', *xoJane*, 24th August 2012. Archived version from August 26th 2012. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20120826010537/http://www.xojane.com/issues/sometimes-i-want-to-burn-down-the-internet-and-move-off-grid>

This resistance is not truly against online connection or computer use, but rather towards the passing of time. For the *xoJane* writers and readers are actively attempting to connect online, but this connection is specifically rooted in a pre-digital nostalgia, specifically a nostalgia for the popular culture of the 1980s and 1990s. A point reflective of the music journalist Simon Reynolds' observation of Web 2.0 as both a key facilitator of affective pop cultural nostalgia, and a reflection of "the crisis of overdocumentation triggered by technology."³³ *xoJane's* nostalgic content ranged from celebrations of the fashion choices of 90s actresses such as Winona Ryder and Liv Tyler, references to 90s teen heartthrobs such as Jordan Catalano of *My So Called Life*, and roundtables of memories of 80s coming of age movies such as *Dirty Dancing* and *Flash Dance*. Whilst, a column entitled "Hazy Pop Cultural Memories", reminisces on subjects ranging from old TV commercial to 90s sitcom tropes. Such an explicit focus on screen media, positions the material within media researchers Katharina Niemeyer and Daniela Wentz' observation that "nostalgic media serve as a cure for the viewers' suffering and longing for a past era, the concept of which the media themselves may have created."³⁴ Change is something to be resisted, whilst the landscape of popular culture is something to be defended, "Don't do this to me, Hollywood", pleads one piece entitled "They're Remaking "Dirty Dancing," and That Sound You Hear is My Inner Preadolescent Girl Weeping Inconsolably."³⁵ This notion of an "inner preadolescent girl" is a reoccurring theme in *xoJane* as one writer attests, "WHO ARE YOU CALLING MA'AM!? Can't they see I'm just a 16-year-old in a 36-year-old's body?!?!?"³⁶ "I am an eternal teenager", claims another.³⁷ This is nostalgia both "privatized and internalized", sitting firmly within Svetlana Boym's of both "collective memory as a playground" and nostalgic desire as:

³³ Simon Reynolds. *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction To It's Own Past*, London, Faber and Faber, 2011. p.56

³⁴ Katharina Niemeyer and Daniela Wentz. 'Nostalgia Is Not What It Used To Be: Serial Nostalgia and Nostalgic Television Series, in: Katharina Niemeyer, *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning For The Past, Present and Future*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. p.130

³⁵ Lesley Kinzel. 'They're Remaking "Dirty Dancing," and That Sound You Hear is My Inner Preadolescent Girl Weeping Inconsolably', 11th August 2011, *xoJane*, Archived version from August 28th 2011. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20110828060143/http://www.xojane.com/entertainment/theyre-remaking-dirty-dancing-and-sound-you-hear-my-inner-preadolescent-girl-weeping-i>

³⁶ Laura Barcella, 2013. 'When (If Ever) Did You Start Feeling Like An Adult?' *xoJane*, December 8th, Archived version from December 10th 2013. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20131210064508/http://www.xojane.com/issues/when-did-you-start-feeling-like-an-adult>

³⁷ Alison Freer. 2012. 'Of Course Panda Bears Wear Overalls! Lisa Frank Is Back! (She Actually Never Left)', October 29th. Archived version from November 1st 2012. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20121101002131/http://www.xojane.com/fun/of-course-panda-bears-wear-overalls>

A yearning for a different time--the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern ide of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.³⁸

This connection to one's inner teenager, is accessed not just through pop cultural nostalgia, but a form of nostalgic object fetish for the possessions of one's girlhood. DIY's are posted on "How To Make Those Streamer Barrettes From Your 70s Or 80s Childhood"-the personal pronoun 'your' making clear that it is the reader, and not just the writer, who is a part of a nostalgic generation X demographic, speaking again to Gullette's vision of "age socialization", and Boym's theory of collective memory.³⁹ Personal belongings from one's earlier years are described in minute detail, with no clear narrative, beyond the simple pleasure of connecting to one's girlhood, evocative of Sigmund Freud's reflection that "the finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it."⁴⁰ For instance, one post consists of description of a writer rediscovering "my high school eyeglasses" that "are plastic, owlish, a weird swirly purple, and HUGE."⁴¹ Here we find a revealing 21st century example of Simone de Beauvoir's observation of "how attached women are to their childhood memories; women's literature makes it clear; [these novels and stories] often go no further than recounting their early years."⁴² With the banality of the subject, illustrating de Beauvoir's argument that when writing on one's girlhood, "the pleasure of simply telling the tale, over rides the contents."⁴³

³⁸ Svetlana Boym. *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York, Basic Books, 2001. p.17

³⁹ Marianne Kirby. 'How To Make Those Streamer Barrettes From Your 70s Or 80s Childhood'. *xoJane*. 15th January 2013. Archived version from January 16th 2013. Accessed 6th February 2023. <https://web.archive.org/web/20130116202716/http://www.xojane.com/diy/how-to-make-those-streamer-barrettes-from-your-70s-or-80s-childhood>

Gullette. *Aged by Culture*, p.12

⁴⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays On Sexuality*. Standard Edition. London, Hogarth, 1905/1953. p.222

⁴¹ Lesley Kinzel. 'A Selection of the Weird Random Nostalgic Crap I Have Uncovered While Cleaning Out My Bedroom Post-Flood.' 16th March 2015, *xoJane*. Archived version from February 24th 2017. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170224231118/http://www.xojane.com/fun/things-i-found-cleaning-after-a-flood>

⁴² Simone de Beauvoir, translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. 1949/2011. *The Second Sex*. New York, Vintage. p. 760.

⁴³ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. p.408

However, *xoJane*'s emphasis on girlhood narrative extends beyond literal discussions of childhood memories and pop culture nostalgia, and towards a wider pleasure in physical disgust, an attribute that de Beauvoir's defines as a core sensory element of girlhood.⁴⁴ This is an attribute Berlant identifies as the "aesthetic pleasure in extremity" and "aesthetic conventions of excess" that marks the intimate public where we may "witness women's lives in a conflation of extremity and ordinariness."⁴⁵ Here the minute descriptions extend beyond childhood keepsakes, and towards disgusting description of everyday life. The site even offered a 'Gross Out Fridays' column, featuring text such as, "and there, emerging from Max's [the writer's dog] little butthole, was the still fully intact mouse, now dead and encased in a thin layer of feces."⁴⁶ This unique blend of pop cultural nostalgia and gross out storytelling sets up the site as a sensory playground of girlhood pleasures, a vision of a free open space where the adult readers may lick, sniff, wear, watch and hear their girlhoods within a likeminded community of women all reaching for the same. The contradiction that the users must access this space through 21st century technology is an anachronism that does not go unignored, with this friction providing a rich portrait of one of the many examples of digitally enabled 20th century childhood nostalgia that populate the internet.

3. 'It Happened To Me': Shifting Receptions of Confessional Writing in Sassy and *xoJane*

⁴⁴ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. p.422

⁴⁵ Berlant. *The Female Complaint*. pp.13, 12

⁴⁶ Marci Robin. 'GROSS-OUT FRIDAYS: My Dog Swallowed A Mouse and Pooped It Out Whole', *xoJane*, 23rd January 2015. Archived version from February 15th 2015. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170127043732/http://www.xojane.com/fun/dog-swallowed-mouse-whole>

The controversial, confessional content of *xoJane*'s first person writing has been used as proof for the cruelty, exploitation, victimology and self-centred nature of the female first-person online genre. However, from 'true life' TV talk shows to *Sassy* cover stories on incest, the painful, personal confessions of 'It Happened to Me' have been a fixture from the very start of Pratt's career. To see Pratt continue this format in an online medium should not be seen as surprising or unique. Rather, the question is how this format is received and reshaped by its existing audience of readers within the context of participatory online publishing where, "the more journalism moves to social media, the more dependent on the personality of its practitioners and hence a discourse of intimacy."⁴⁷

Within this section, the magazine's outsized influence of the digital feminist sphere, will be explored with the objective of understanding the transmission of nostalgia within *xoJane* itself, as well as wider tensions in regards to the commercialisation of feminist intimacy. By studying the seemingly contradictory relationship between feminist idealism and commercial digital publishing, we can better understand online representations of traumatic, and otherwise intimate, themes within the commercial context of both contemporary digital enterprise and historical print publishing. This in turn, can help to identify how conceptions and receptions towards questions of authorial identity and reader production has shifted from *Sassy* to *xoJane*. Both of Pratt's projects reflect women's first-person published narratives as both a private and a public medium, something to be experienced in private shame, only to be confessed publicly for payment in a catchy style.⁴⁸ Here, it should be recognised that such an industry of intimacy, privileges a model of white feminine interiority, with the journalist and editor Latoya Peterson emphasising:

⁴⁷ Steen Steenson. 'The Intimization of Journalism'. In Witschge, T, Anderson, C. W., and Hermida, A. (eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Digital Journalism*. London, SAGE, 2016. p. 26–27.

⁴⁸ Jesella and Meltzer, *How Sassy Changed My Life*, p. 32.

This overshare, gross-out phenomenon of ‘first-person writing’ is generally a door that leads to more fame and work *for white women*. This route to publication and a book/movie deal simply is not open for non-white women. Society sees women of color’s shameless writing as proof of deviance, not a relatable and fun story to share on social media. The backlash, when we do open up in that way, is normally immediate and often includes a Twitter referendum on how we are failing the race.⁴⁹

Though no specific data on the race and class of Pratt’s earlier print venture *Sassy* is available, published histories of the publication report that both readership and editorial team were largely white and middle class.⁵⁰ Whilst, *Sassy*’s issue of white, liberal racism was even criticised within the publication itself, with *Sassy* writer and editor Diane Paylor writing a piece inspired by the anti-Black racism she experienced in the *Sassy* workplace, entitled ‘With Friends Like These’, which considered the way “an African American experiences ingrained prejudices at the hands of her supposed friends and colleague.”⁵¹ Such concerns, speak to the feminist confessional model which, as the trauma theorist Kali Tal argues, fails to connect “their [white American feminists of the 1970s-1990s] own drive to testify to atrocity and the long tradition of antiracist and antisexist testimonial literatures that preceded their movement.”⁵² Here Tal, in studying the American feminist confessional publishing of the 1970s and 1980s observed that such a “narrow perspective, combined with the thoughtless racism and ethnocentrism of much feminist activism of the period, resulted in a movement in which white women were over-represented.”⁵³ This in turn lead to active whitewashing, where “narratives by women of colour were ignored, decontextualized or appropriated.”⁵⁴ In this sense, Pratt’s career offers a unique prototype for pre-digital American women’s magazine studies, helping us contextualise outlandish online examples within a longer history of feminist identified publications. Whilst, by considering their exclusionary histories, such nostalgic idealisation of feminist media may be critically challenged.

As, Bill Van Parys, who served as the executive editor of *Jane Magazine* argues, Pratt predicted, “the beginning of the Facebooking of our culture, the dawn of the age of oversharing”.⁵⁵ Similarly, technology journalist, Erin Schulte, proposes that “Jane Pratt, was social media before social media existed”, due to Sassy’s focus on audience engagement, through annual issues produced entirely by their young readers (fig. 4), and the regular ‘Stuff You Wrote’ (fig. 5) feature, which showcased poetry, essays and personal observations submitted to the magazine.⁵⁶ Whilst, the magazine’s ironic, self-aware editorial style, arguably, “created the voice of a thousand snark-filled blogs.”⁵⁷

⁴⁹ Latoya Peterson, quoted in Ruth Spencer, ‘The First-Person Essays Boom: Top Editors on Why Confessional Writing Matters’, *The Guardian*, 15th September 2015. Accessed 6th February 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/sep/15/first-person-essay-confessional-writing-editors-writers>

⁵⁰ Jesella and Meltzer, *How Sassy Changed My Life* p.98

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., p. 160

⁵³ Tal, *Worlds of Hurt*, p. 156.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Carl Swanson. ‘Jane Pratt’s Perpetual Adolescence: Why She’s Still Talking Teen Three Decades After Sassy’, *The Cut*, 14th August 2012. Accessed 6th February 2023. <https://www.thecut.com/2012/08/happened-to-jane-pratt.html>

⁵⁶ Erin Schulte, ‘Sassy 2.0: Social Media Catches Up With Jane Pratt At xoJane.com’, *Fast Company*, 6th May 2011. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://www.fastcompany.com/1753557/sassy-20-social-media-catches-jane-pratt-xojanecom>

⁵⁷ Ibid.

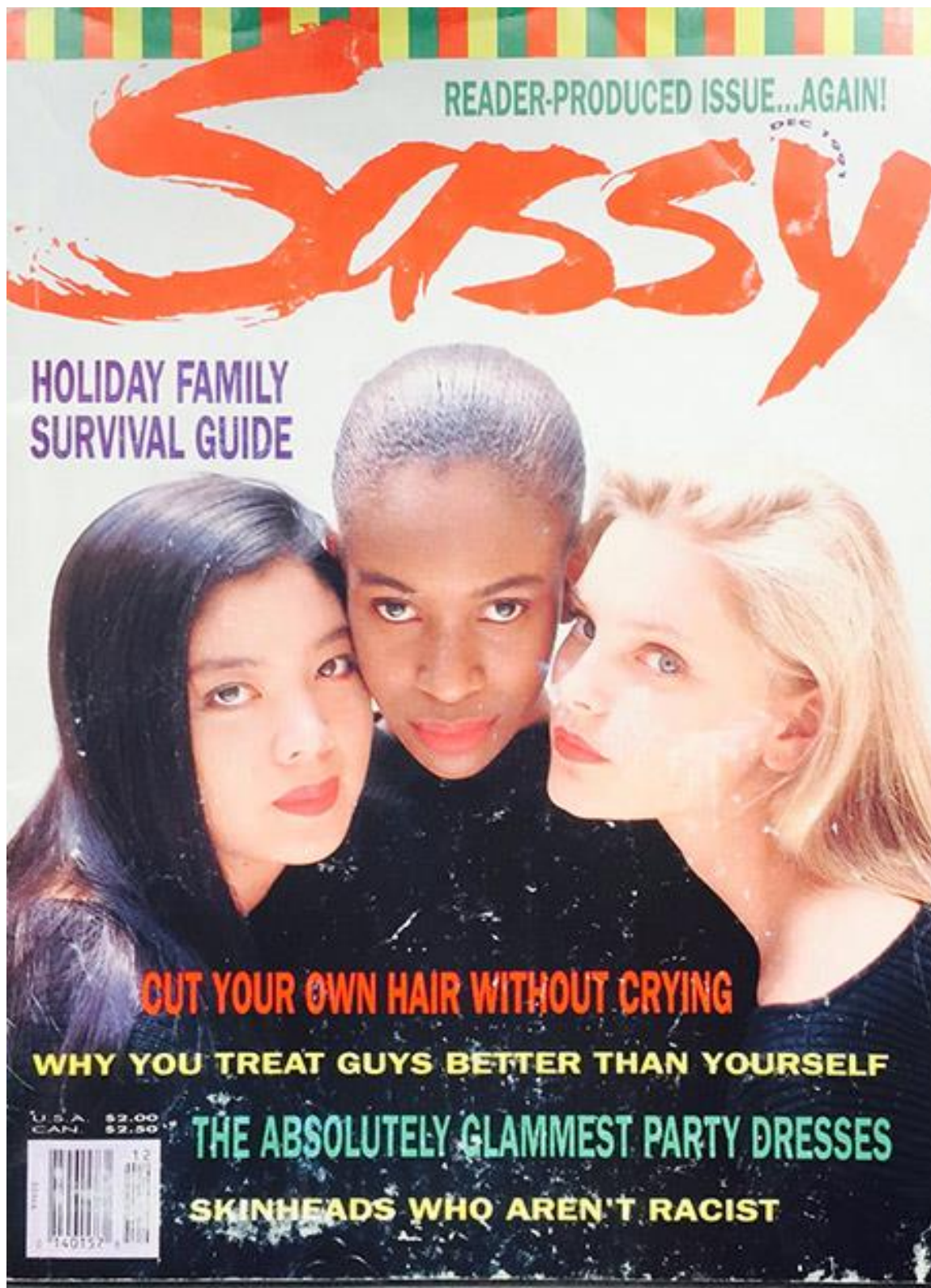


Figure 4.

Reader produced issue of *Sassy Magazine*, December 1991 (Fairfax Publications: NYC: USA)

STUFF YOU WROTE

SOLITUDE

Rainwashed days
Of faded grays
And tattered dreams
Streets littered with broken glass
A windswept world
Of passing scenery
Shadows of darkness
And patterns of blurred colors
This is not solitude
Solitude is a gliding bird high
above the world
The fragments of an image
Of a pale flower
A cat on a rooftop
Watching the coming of dawn
The shade of a mountain
Or a cool sip of fresh water drops
To be alone with yourself
No social masks
Put on to hide from others
Solitude is standing
By the clear, crystal fountain
For to be alone
Is not to be lonely.

Alissa Heyman
Lincroft, NJ

**I WONDER IF, SAY, I WAS
A LIZARD ... WOULD I
THINK THAT THE WORLD
REVOLVED AROUND LIZ-
ARDS LIKE HUMANS FEEL
THE WORLD REVOLVES
AROUND HUMANS?**

Gina DeGiovanni
Prairie du Sac, WI

**WHY DO TEENAGERS 13-
16 HAVE TO PAY THE
"ADULT" PRICE FOR MOV-
IES BUT CAN'T SEE R-RAT-
ED MOVIES? THE PEOPLE
THAT DECIDED THESE
RULES ARE MONEY-GRUB-
BING SCUM.**

Dandi Brooks
Brentwood, TN

**WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN
PARTLY CLOUDY AND PARTLY SUNNY?
IS IT THAT ONE WEATHERMAN IS MORE
OPTIMISTIC THAN ANOTHER? WHO
KNOWS??**

Laura Archazki
Marco Island, FL

**"To be great is to be misunderstood," right? So
it must be great that I like to watch MTV. My
parents seem to think that music videos are bad
for me. I happen to think that videos stimulate
your mind more than any other kind of TV.
When people watch soap operas, sitcoms and
cartoons, everything is right there on the
screen, you don't think at all. But videos are so
vague that each person determines the mean-
ing of the song by watching and thinking. And
I'd be willing to bet you a lot of money that you
won't find anyone dancing around while watch-
ing "General Hospital."**

Rebecca Tanner
Lexington, KY

Are you a closet poet? A frustrated essayist? Or just a weirdo with a lot of bizarre thoughts? Have we got a page for you. Send your writing to Catherine, *Stuff You Wrote, Sassy*, 1 Times Square, New York, NY 10036. Okay?

FEBRUARY '89 SASSY 83

Fig.5.

Sassy Magazine, February 1989 (Fairfax Publications: NYC: USA) p.83

The connection between public commercial consumption and private misery has a long history, as a medium that courted the casual female reader. It can be identified in *Sassy*'s attention grabbing 'It Happened To Me' cover stories, which "did an excellent job of reeling in 13-18 year old [girls] who saw it while grocery shopping with Mom or at the mall".⁵⁸ However, whilst *Sassy* was canonised for its "level of honesty and intimacy [that] was unprecedented in an American teen magazine", *xoJane* was increasingly reviled for this same approach within an online, adult context, and instead of a devoted fanbase it was "hate read" for its "cartoonishly controversial content."⁵⁹ Existing as both a running joke and an object of disdain in the online publishing world, Mary Elizabeth Williams for *Slate* observed "it's no secret that *xoJane* is the very bottom of the Internet Confessional with a Shabby Veneer of Legitimacy barrel".⁶⁰ But despite its often negative reception, *xoJane* can be considered as a continuation of the *Sassy* model pioneered by Pratt. Furthermore, such critical responses should not be wholly attributed to the site itself, but also to a growing sense of disillusionment in the 2010s that "the dream of a better, truer self on the internet was slipping away" leading to a "curdling of social internet."⁶¹

The limits of *xoJane*'s 'It Happened to Me' series, which translates a woman's personal struggles into a "lucrative internet product", should be contextualised in 'the digital depression' of its creation, within the late 2000s to mid-2010s, where low-paid writing content, was a favoured commodity due to budget constraints.⁶² Consistent with Pratt's previous publishing endeavours the audience is constantly brought into the articles of *xoJane*. In this site, "the commenters are as fundamental as the writers" because, the commenters *are* the writers of so much of the site's work.⁶³ This is reflective of the "prosumer" model of digital media, where a vast amount of content for the site is generated by the readers themselves.⁶⁴ This is itself indicative of the shift from the print medium of *Sassy* to the online environment of *xoJane*, where "staff doesn't pick one or two [comments] to run in the front-of-book Letters section. We all get to read every last one of them."⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Jesella and Meltzer, *How Sassy Changed My Life*, p. 14.

⁵⁹ Jesella and Meltzer, *How Sassy Changed My Life*, p. 12

Eve Peyser, 'The Biggest Moments in xoJane History', *Jezebel*, 24th January 2017. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://jezebel.com/the-biggest-moments-in-xojane-history-1791157774>

⁶⁰ Mary Elizabeth Williams, 'Worst Personal Essay Ever? xoJane Scrapes the Bottom of the Hate-Read Barrel', *Salon*, 20th May 2016. Accessed 6th February 2023

https://www.salon.com/2016/05/20/worst_personal_essay_ever_xojane_scrapes_the_bottom_of_the_hate_read_barrel/

⁶¹ Jia Tolentino, *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self Delusion*. London: 4th Estate, 2019. pp. 8, 7

⁶² Dan Schiller, 'Digital Capitalism: Stagnation and Contention?', *Open Democracy*, 13th October 2015, Accessed 6th February 2023

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/digital-capitalism-stagnation-and-contention/>

Judy Berman, 'Didion Hunger vs. the First-Person Industrial Complex', *Flavorwire*, 17th September 2015. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<http://flavorwire.com/538107/didion-hunger-vs-the-first-person-industrial-complex>.

⁶³ Rebecca Jane Stokes. 'I FED AN INTERNET TROLL AND I WISH I HADN'T', *xoJane*, 3rd December 2012. Archived version from December 6th 2012. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20121206011352/http://www.xojane.com/issues/girl-on-girl-trolling>

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Frayssé and O'Neil, *Digital Labour and Prosumer Capitalism*, pp. 3, 10, 11.

⁶⁵ Molly Mogren. 'IT HAPPENED TO ME: I WROTE FOR XOJANE', *Hey Eleanor!*, 2nd April 2015. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://heyeleanor.com/it-happened-to-me-xojane/>

Entire articles are comprised of reader comments, whilst questions towards the comment section are frequent, ranging from the intimate, “Are there other women out there who have pooped their pants? ARE THERE?”, to the political, “Do you blame yourself for Hillary losing the election?”⁶⁶ Readers are invited to actively contribute, not just to the stories published, but to the life choices of the writers, creating a choose your adventure element to reading these autobiographical texts.⁶⁷ These articles often reflect a sincere attempt to reach out for connection, which reflects Berlant’s observation of the intimate public sphere as “a place of recognition and reflection”.⁶⁸ This is a wish for affirmation that, as one piece concludes, “Please tell me somebody out there can relate.”⁶⁹

However, the digital landscape of their publication market complicates Pratt’s existing vision of reader production and engagement as a form of creative empowerment, where *Sassy* magazine “differentiated itself from the majority of girls’ magazines in the market by empowering its readers to understand the process of magazine production and to see themselves as the focus of that process.”⁷⁰ Instead, such content is not an interruption but a continuation of a model of digital media, where creative work is “deskilled, flexible, temporary and underpaid”, leading to “further deprofessionalization of roles and positions within the women’s magazine industry.”⁷¹ This issue is evidenced in a 2012 magazine profile, where Pratt admits that, “with all of the part-timers and out-of-the-office writers feeding the site’s content, [she’s] not even sure exactly how many people work for her”, and that by adopting “the confiding tone of *Sassy* and *Jane* and put[ting] it on the blog-age assembly line of fifteen posts a day she can’t even read [many of the pieces] before they go up.”⁷²

⁶⁶ Emily McCombs. ‘I Did Something So Horrible This Morning That I Can’t Even Put It In My Headline’, *xoJane*, 12th October 2012. Archived version October 22nd 2012. Accessed 6th February 2023.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20121022093130/http://www.xojane.com/healthy/i-did-something-so-horrible-this-morning-that-i-cant-even-put-it-in-my-headline>

Jane Pratt. ‘Who Do You Blame for Our New President-Elect?’ *xoJane*, 19th November 2016. Archived version from November 21st 2016. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20161121223301/http://www.xojane.com/janes-phone/who-to-blame-election-results>

⁶⁷ Jane Pratt. 'What Shape Glasses are Best For My Face?' *xoJane*, 13th January 2012. Archived version from January 15th 2012. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20120115214713/http://www.xojane.com/janes-stuff/what-shape-glasses-are-best-my-face>

"So xoJane readers, I have to know: what should I do? Shall I flee the country? Hide out in grad school? Become a dog walker? Guide me with your wisdom or just tell me I'm screwed!"

Rachel Marks. 'I think my English Major Might Be Worthless and I'm Scared', *xoJane*, 12th November 2012. Archived version from November 12th 2012. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20121112070009/http://www.xojane.com/issues/i-think-my-english-major-might-be-worthless-and-im-scared>

⁶⁸ Lauren Berlant. *The Female Complaint*. Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 2008. viii

⁶⁹ Anonymous. 'IT HAPPENED TO ME: I'M A WICKED STEPMOTHER', 17th July 2012. Archived version from July 22nd 2012. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20120722185721/http://www.xojane.com/it-happened-me/it-happened-me-im-wicked-stepmother>

⁷⁰ Claudia Mitchell, Jacqueline Reid-Walsh. *Girl Culture: An Encyclopaedia*. Connecticut, Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007. p.517.

⁷¹ Brooke Erin Duffy. *Remake, Remodel: Women's Magazines in the Digital age*. Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2013. pp.9, 65

⁷² Swanson. 'Jane Pratt's Perpetual Adolescence.'

Within this landscape, the financial mechanisms behind the publication of *xoJane*'s personal writing become visible in the comment section, the very space that is generating so much of the content for the site to continue their work. Exact figures of payments are frankly discussed in order to disparage the conditions of these stories' creation, and to question the ethics of being paid to publish such intimate stories at all. "The going rate for selling one's terrible memories has dropped to \$30??", expresses one reader in horror at the meagre rewards of the *xoJane* confessional model.⁷³ Whilst, "hungry for \$50 and completely dead on the inside", is another reader's candid verdict to a particularly disturbing story of a writer who claims that a former friend's death by suicide was a "blessing" due to her existing struggles with mental illness.⁷⁴ These stories are not understood by their readers as empowering acts of feminist community, but rather unethical betrayals motivated by financial profit. This itself reflects the limits of what Novoselova and Przybylo define as "hybrid [feminist identified] media that maintain a DIY look and an intimate, informal feel of a personal blog while generating revenue for a corporate media platform."⁷⁵ And it is this contradictory blend of commercial gain and messy personal exposure that helped cast *xoJane* as the villainous counterpart to *Sassy Magazine*.

4. Cruelty, Community and the Limits of Conclusion

The complexity of cultural engagement in Pratt's confessional genre can be developed further within the context of its online audience. Jane Pratt's motto "the more personal and vulnerable a writer is, the better" certainly takes on a different meaning when transferred to an online environment, known for extreme hostility and abuse.⁷⁶ Here the slumber party sisterhood stylings of *Sassy*'s intimate public sphere grew increasingly unconvincing, as, in the more transparent space of the digital, the cynicism of capitalist exploitation and the capacity for staff and reader cruelty became increasingly visible. Reflecting on how Jane Pratt's 'It Happened to Me' segment had changed, in its shift from the print pages of *Sassy* to the online environment of *xoJane*, journalist Jennifer Kathleen Gibbons writes that:

⁷³ Comment by FactCheckOK? posted on: Erica Ferencik. 'IT HAPPENED TO ME: I Walked 10 Blocks with a Used Menstrual Pad Stuck to My Shoulder', *xoJane*, December 6th 2016. Accessed 6th February 2023.

https://disqus.com/home/discussion/xojane/it_happened_to_me_i_walked_10_blocks_with_a_used_menstrual_pad_stuck_to_my_shoulder_by_eric_a_ferenci/

⁷⁴ Comment by meowsitgoing posted on: Amanda Lauren. 'My Former Friend's Death Was a Blessing', *xoJane*, 19th May 2016. Last accessed 6th February 2023.

https://disqus.com/home/discussion/xojane/my_former_friends_death_was_a_blessing_by_amanda_lauren

⁷⁵ Novoselova and Przybylo, 'Blogging Affects' p.95.

⁷⁶ Karla Mantilla., *Gender trolling: How Misogyny Went Viral: How Misogyny Went Viral*, California: ABC-CLIO: 2015, pp. 95, 158, 18, 220.

The essays were darker, sadder. Several times I thought about sending something in. Truth is I'm too boring for *xoJane*. Plus they only paid fifty dollars an essay. Since the site was owned by TimeLife, I figured they could cough up more dough than fifty dollars.⁷⁷

The question of power is crucial to why the *xoJane* narrative format not only makes so many people uncomfortable, but also problematises simplistic notions of the empowered survivor bravely speaking out in order to liberate others.⁷⁸ Rather, we see such unequal power structures replicated between editor and author, employer and worker. Mandy Stadtmiller, an editor of *xoJane*'s 'It Happened to Me' column, went so far as to describe herself as a "roving predator bent on turning other people's lives into 1,200-word essays on the human experience."⁷⁹ This subverts the feminist support model of sexual violence storytelling, where a trauma survivor is able to "utter taboo words in a safe and supportive environment", so that in the act of confession "our monsters may become manageable".⁸⁰ Within this feminist vision, the traumatic story is shown as a neat resolution, not just to the suffering of the individual survivor, where through publication, "the women in these pages have transformed themselves, like phoenixes rising from the ashes, through their own words", but an end to future acts of sexual violence towards women and children via awareness raising.⁸¹ As illustrated by Tal's criticism, such idealism is not truly reflective of the reality of 20th century feminist publishing, and we must resist such nostalgic readings of this history. Louise Armstrong, one of the pioneers of the child sexual abuse survivor first-person genre, emphasised this shortcoming. When reflecting on the legacy of her work, Armstrong lamented that "exclusively personal solutions do nothing to defy the ongoing tacit permission for abuse."⁸² Yet, this online editorial model, still stands in stark contrast to both the visions and aspirations of feminist first person publishing, and the feminist utopia Pratt sought to present.

⁷⁷ Jennifer Kathleen Gibbons, 'Amanda Lauren, XO Jane and What's Happened to Jane Pratt?', *Stereo Embers*, 23rd May 2016. Accessed 6th February 2023. <http://stereoembersmagazine.com/whatever-happened-jane-pratt/>

⁷⁸ Tal, *Worlds of Hurt*, p. 124.

⁷⁹ Stadtmiller, 'It Happened to Me.'

⁸⁰ Toniah A. H. McNaron and Yarrow Morgan. *Voices in the Night: Women Speaking About Incest*, New Jersey, Cleis Press, 1984. pp. 18-19; Tal, *Worlds of Hurt*, p. 124.

⁸¹ Ellen Bass and Louise Thornton. *I Never Told Anyone: Writings by Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, New York, Harper and Row, 1983. p. 22; *ibid.*, pp. 16-17; *ibid.*, p. 221.

⁸² Louise Armstrong. *Kiss Daddy Goodnight: Ten Years Later*, New York: Pocket Books, 1987. p. 286.

Such concerns, extend beyond editor and author, to the site's readers and commenters. As writer Anabelle Bernard Fournier emphasises, "Most disturbing to me was the fact that it wasn't misogynistic troll dudes bashing the writers and editors there [on the *xoJane* comment section] – it was, usually, women bashing other women, and appearing to take great joy in doing this".⁸³ Writer Ali Barthwell similarly notes that "The unmitigated comment section allowed for hate and vitriol to spread and left writers vulnerable."⁸⁴ This echoes the life writing scholar Professor Leigh Gilmore's warning that, "the judgments such [personal] accounts [of intimate trauma] invite may be too similar to forms in which trauma was experienced."⁸⁵ The abuser/survivor dichotomy is thus complicated by considering the online audience's own capacity to hurt and heal the survivor. In this sense, rather than simply being empowered by these texts, a reader also has the potential to be complicit in standing witness to these crimes, or even becoming an abuser by actively harassing the writer. This stands as an example of the American writer Maggie Nelson's proposition that the art of cruelty goes beyond "why are you still looking" and instead chooses to ask, "how will you participate in this?"⁸⁶

⁸³ Stadtmiller, 'xoJane: My Former Website's Death Was A Blessing.'

⁸⁴ Ali Barthwell, quoted in *ibid*.

⁸⁵ Leigh Gilmore. 'Limit Cases: Trauma, Self-Representation, and the Jurisdictions of Identity' *Biography*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2001. p.129

⁸⁶ Maggie Nelson. *The Art of Cruelty*, New York, W. W. Norton, 2012. p. 79.

The limits of narration as conclusion are highlighted through *xoJane*'s online environment, through its capacity for an endless narration of one's intimate memories. Here, as Pratt explains, "the beauty of technology now is that we can document these things as they happen, so there is never a beginning, middle, and end to our stories."⁸⁷ Yet, regardless of the site's informal style, the personal stories still push to fit a traditional narrative model, and find deeper meaning and an empowering sense of closure in the most unexpected, and potentially embarrassing, of stories.⁸⁸ This remains consistent with Berlant's studies of 20th century sentimental literature where, "hard edged titles conceal the tender fantasies of a better good life."⁸⁹ Notably, though these stories range from interpersonal violence and structural oppression to cringeworthy anecdotes, the tone remains largely the same. This blurs the definition of the trauma confessional as quite simply within this model of publishing every experience, from being raped by your father to losing your phone on the subway, is rendered traumatic, interchangeable and profound.

⁸⁷ Jane Pratt. 'How To Quit Faking It', *Glamour Magazine*, 11th December 2012. Last accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://www.glamour.com/story/how-to-quit-faking-it-glamour-magazine-january-2013>

⁸⁸ "I resolved at that moment to always reach out if I came across someone who needed any help that I was capable of giving — a vow I've kept until this day."

Ferencik, E. 'IT HAPPENED TO ME: I Walked 10 Blocks with a Used Menstrual Pad Stuck to My Shoulder', *xoJane*, 6th December 2016. Archived version from December 9th 2016. Accessed 6th February 2023.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20161209122105/http://www.xojane.com/it-happened-to-me/used-kotex-stuck-to-shoulder>

⁸⁹ Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, p.1

However, despite such optimistic intentions, neat narratives of therapeutic healing are frequently impossible. As Pratt emphasises, when working in print, “every issue [for *Sassy* and *Jane*] would come out monthly so the pace of the freakiness was much more manageable.”⁹⁰ This longer turnaround gave contributors the time to heal from the events they were recollecting, because “in those days [if a writer was going to write about drug use] she could go to rehab and get all cleaned up and sober before her mom got the subscribers copy in the mail.”⁹¹ In contrast, the site showcases the fallout of controversial articles in real time, through follow up pieces from writers, readers and editors, allowing the site to address the hurtful impact such confessions can have on one’s personal relationships. On the discovery that her husband has read her *xoJane* piece entitled ‘Feminism Has Enabled My Husband to Become Lazy and Selfish’, the writer laments “it’s possible that publishing the piece was one of the worst decisions I’ve ever made.”⁹² In this example, Pratt’s vision of digital publishing as a story with no end takes on a different meaning. Here we find not further adventures and anecdotes, but rather a profound regret for having spoken at all. This is reflective of *xoJane*’s status as “very much an experiment that way, one that you’re all a part of”, in a space where “the medium is new enough that the lines aren’t well drawn and can be razor thin.”⁹³

Here, it is important to position *xoJane* as a revealing archive, not just to the limits of writing for Pratt’s current site, but also for her earlier print ventures of *Sassy* and *Jane*. Notably, a number of follow up pieces were published on the site, not just from *xoJane* posts written only a few days prior, but from *Sassy* and *Jane* contributors, whose confessional writing had been published decades ago. Some tell stories of professional disappointment of working with Pratt, such as the writer Marci Robin, whose story was published in *Jane* Magazine, without the author’s name in the byline: “I was hoping to use the article as the star of my then-empty portfolio, but it didn’t even have my name on it.”⁹⁴ However, even more powerful are the stories that consider the limits, not just of an individual woman’s career, but of the nature of storytelling itself.

⁹⁰ Jane Pratt. 'Jane Pratt: Secrets of a Publishing Renegade', *South by Southwest Festival*, Austin Convention Center, Texas, 12th March 2013. Recording last accessed 6th February 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNPW-uvDoyQ>

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Carisa Peterson. 'I Told My Husband About My Previous Articles on xoJane', *xoJane*, 23rd September 2016. Archived version January 25th 2017. Last accessed 6th February 2023. <http://web.archive.org/web/20170125204229/http://www.xojane.com/issues/husband-knows-read-my-xojane-articles>

⁹³ Julieanne Smolinski. 'A QUICK NOTE ON INTERNET NICENESS', *xoJane*, 23rd February 2012. Archived version from March 1st 2012. Accessed 6th February 2023. <https://web.archive.org/web/20120301123008/http://www.xojane.com/issues/quick-note-internet-niceness>

⁹⁴ Marci Robin. 'IT HAPPENED TO ME: I WROTE AN ANONYMOUS "IT HAPPENED TO ME" IN JANE MAGAZINE', *xoJane*, 24th June 2014. Archived version from June 25th 2014. Last accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140625145447/http://www.xojane.com/it-happened-to-me/it-happened-to-me-i-wrote-an-anonymous-it-happened-to-me-in-jane-magazine>

Consider the 2013 *xoJane* piece, 'My Mom's Traumatic Brain Injury Was Published by Sassy and Not Much has Changed', which was featured as part of the 'It Happened to Me: Raw and Unedited' competition, with a "big money" prize as a first-place incentive.⁹⁵ It tells the story of the writer publishing her original 'It Happened to Me' story for Sassy at age twenty-four, feeling that "I truly believed that I would learn, Mom would learn, we all would learn from Mommy's head injury. As a family, we would become closer, more understanding, more empathetic, and loving."⁹⁶ At the time of writing the injury was "relatively recent and the tone was optimistic", because "we [as a family] hoped that rehabilitation would fix everything. We hoped for a new kind of normal."⁹⁷ The piece then returns to their lives twenty-one years later, in stark and uncompromising terms:

What I would tell that 24 year-old is know that you will never be able to write the story of you and Mom because the end keeps changing, that all you have is the beginning, when you realized you lost your mother, but she is there, and that is a pain for which you have no words.⁹⁸

No happy ending is found because it is "nothing like movies", no positive message can be salvaged after all these years because "it ruined my [her mother's] life", and far from finding healing in the passing of time, "what we didn't know is that things get worse over time with head injuries."⁹⁹ Instead, in an online archive of endless posts, from embarrassing anecdotes to personal rants, nostalgic rants and painful reflections, we find an 'It Happened to Me' on the "rhetorical failure" of traumatic expression, and the pain in trying to push towards an impossible ending.¹⁰⁰ In this sense, as much as Pratt's work is limited by the white bourgeois borders of the intimate public sphere, it is also undermined by the nature of time. In a landscape of online updates, the myth of narrative conclusion is killed, so no full stop can be found to these unhappy stories.

Conclusion

⁹⁵ IHTM CONTESTANT. 'IT HAPPENED TO ME CONTEST ENTRY: MY MOM'S TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY WAS PUBLISHED BY SASSY AND NOT MUCH HAS CHANGED', *xoJane*, 12th March 2013, Archived version from March 14th 2013. Last accessed 6th February 2023.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20130314233156/http://www.xojane.com/it-happened-to-me/it-happened-to-me-contest-entry-my-moms-traumatic-brain-injury-was-published-by-sassy-and-not-much-has-changed>

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Lauren Berlant. 'Trauma and Ineloquence'. *Cultural Values*. Volume 5. Number 1, 2001. p.44.

The divisive reception of confessional online women's writing, as evidenced by the scandals and sensation of Pratt's media output, has the potential to cloud critical thought on this complex subject, provoking polarised reactions of outrage and disgust. Such reactions are not an interruption, however, but rather the intention of such texts that define themselves by gross out storytelling and wilfully provocative rhetoric. The response-driven nature of this subject has thus been centred in my analysis of *xoJane*'s 'It Happened to Me' series, through analysis of follow-up think pieces, blog posts and online humour.

Though this research was restricted to a select number of close reading studies within American publishing, its findings have the potential to be developed in a number of directions, using a range of methodologies. With an experienced team of researchers, the subject could be brought forward using an ethnographic lens into a series of interviews into reader's responses to both *xoJane* and *Sassy*. Furthermore, the paper's combination of contemporary and historical sources is illustrative of the long history of this confessional genre, and it would be entirely possible to dedicate an entire research project to this timeline.

The question of consumption is particularly pertinent when closely examining the historical context in which these digital stories, both traumatic and nostalgic, are situated. Here the enduring commercial interest in feminist confessional storytelling, and the construction of authentic suffering and compassionate sisterhood that imbues it with worth, clashes with the impure association of transferring painful experiences to a marketable product. A point heightened within a hostile environment of casual online cruelty. This in turn reflects the tension between feminist community and corporate accountability in a feminist, neoliberal, digital capitalist publishing setting, a friction deepened by the existing failures of white, middle-class feminist liberation.

With the ‘first-person factory’ of *xoJane* closing in 2016, the journalist Jia Tolentino declaring the first-person online essay dead altogether in 2017, and *xoJane*’s archives deleted completely in 2018, it would be appropriate to assume that this particular period of first-person confession was contained to the 2010s. However, as evidenced by *xoJane*’s clear connections to Pratt’s earlier print career, it would be as inaccurate to say that such a medium is finished as to say that it started in the 2010s.¹⁰¹ Rather, by understanding Pratt’s publishing career as a revealing example of Lauren Berlant’s theory of the intimate public, *xoJane* and *Sassy* provide vivid examples of this particular framework of affect in both print and digital audience engagement.

Here the borders between the nostalgic and the traumatic are problematised, and we are presented with a vivid archive of digital media, where “the presence of the past in our lives has increased immeasurably and insidiously.”¹⁰² The ghosts of aging 90s stars and dusty childhood ephemera, press painfully against memories both unpleasant and embarrassing, to create a congealed archive of the personal that resists happy endings. Its conclusion, perhaps only found in the site’s eventual closure, leaving it to sink out of sight of the surface web, into the archives of collective memory, and ironically into nostalgia itself. As one 2022 Reddit commenter reflects, “As problematic and terrible as it [*xoJane*] could be, it is super nostalgic to me. I wish the site was still up so I could binge some of the articles for old time’s sake.”¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Jia Tolentino, ‘The Personal-Essay Boom is Over’, *The New Yorker*, 18th May 2017. Accessed 6th February 2023.

www.newyorker.com/culture/jia-tolentino/the-personal-essay-boom-is-over

¹⁰² Reynolds, *Retromania*, p.57

¹⁰³ u/Russiadontgiveafuck, ‘anybody wanna reminisce about the horrors of xojane/xovain with me?’ *blogsnark*, *Reddit*, 2022, Accessed 6th February 2023.

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