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"We are the future": Advant-aged women speak-out through spoken word poetry

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate women between the ages of 50 and 70 who write and perform spoken word poetry, through which they wish to lead positive social change, by turning the culture of silence into open discourse. This period represents a new phase of life. These women are at an "in-between" phase of being no longer young but not yet old and are between life roles. This is a new age group that has not yet been studied. We argue that this stage of life requires a new term. The term chosen for this study is advant-age because it implies the advantages and opportunities that this period of life affords. Although this group of women is growing in relation to the general population, the ageism and sexism they experience are increasing, creating a gradual process of social exclusion and reduction in their agency. Spoken Word Poetry (SWP) is written on a page but performed live in front of an audience. It is a poetic piece that includes rhythm, rhyme, and sometimes humor, which help convey complex messages with finesse. The importance of the current research lies in revealing a new and unresearched social phenomenon that has been developing in Israel in recent years: Advant-aged women are discussing issues that society usually silences, using methods that traditionally have been associated with younger groups. Through SWP, advant-aged women are enabling the possibility of raising these issues for public discussion and creating an opportunity for social change.

Introduction

With the increase in life expectancy in Western and Israeli society, the second half of life is becoming longer and includes many stages of maturity and aging (Hebers, 2019). These significant changes influence the perception of aging. Today this phase of a person's life no longer marks a simple transition to old age; rather it now constitutes a new, relatively long interim period which holds many opportunities for development and renewal (Dolberg & Ayalon, 2018; Karisto, 2007; Shimoni, 2018). Thus, this period of life requires a new definition and new name to replace the terms "middle age" or "midlife," to denote an age range or intermediate period. The new term should reflect not only the fact that these women are no longer young but not yet old, but also the uniqueness of this period; A reduction in commitments to family and professional roles leads to increased opportunities (Ayalon & Lir, 2022; Dolberg, 2012; Dolberg &

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Ayalon, 2018). We dare to suggest the term "advant-aged" because it implies the advantages and opportunities that this period of life affords and attributes a sense of empowerment and agency to aging women (Wray, 2004).

It's important to re-define this new phase of life because we age in accordance with cultural scripts (Schwaiger, 2006). Concepts such as middle age, mid-life or the third age carry such negative social meanings that most people refuse to define themselves as such (Calasanti, 2007). These perceptions increase exclusion and reduce the agency of older women (de Travernier & Aartsen, 2019). To reduce the negativity and to show the advantages that this period of life entails, it is important to use different terms which also include positive contents rather than merely negative ones (Calasanti, 2007). As culture creates these constructions, culture can also change them, thus allowing these women to age with agency (de Travernier & Aartsen, 2019).

Therefore, the purpose of the present study is twofold: the first is to define a new age group, which is called advant-age. This term aims to replace commonly used terms such as middle age or mid-life by stressing advantages and opportunities that come with more advanced age. The second aim is to uncover ways in which advant-aged women wish to lead social change. Hence, the research questions enquire about the ways in which these women use Spoken Word Poetry (SWP) as an activist tool to change social discourse, and how they express their agency. We also examined how they expose personal, sensitive issues through SWP, thereby raising them for public discussion to create social change.

Literature review

"Advant-aged women"

The period called middle age has not been extensively studied and lacks theoretical and operative conceptualizations. Various concepts describing this period appear in the research literature, such as middle age or midlife, but there is no consensus among researchers about the age range that these definitions include. For some women, this period of life is a turning point in which the roles, responsibilities, and patterns of daily life change substantially. This can trigger uncertainty about the present and thoughts about future possibilities. It is a time when the perspective on life is broader than ever: Past, present, and future intersect, offering an opportunity to reflect on the course of the life people have gone through and where they might go next (Dolberg & Ayalon, 2018; Wray, 2007).

For some women, this period holds many advantages, as they are free of paid employment, have less responsibility for young children, still healthy enough to be active, and relatively financially independent. They enjoy a transitional period that is partly comparable to adolescence (van Mens-Verhulst & Radtke, 2013), which allows them to rebel against social conventions (Pickhardt, 2009), and enables personal fulfillment, renewal and the realization of ambitions and desires (Shimoni, 2018).

This period can be seen as liminal, because women are between times—between the end of adulthood and the beginning of aging (Dolberg & Ayalon, 2018) and in the process of changing their life roles (Karisto, 2007; van Mens-Verhulst & Radtke, 2013). Victor Turner defined liminality as an intermediate state of betwixt and between, which characterizes rites of passage. It is a transitional space between social structures and attitudes, statuses, or roles associated with them. While it can be a vague, unstable state, it also has the potential for renewal and growth. This liminal state involves the reversal of social norms, allowing freedom from an orderly, structured life managed by social control, social demands, and chronological age, in which an opportunity is created for changing roles and redefining self-identity. Liminality provides a sphere of self-expression and freedom to create new interests (Bigger, 2009; Yarnal, 2006).

Advant-age is thus a liminal period in which these women have more freedom to redefine themselves and express themselves more boldly, but at the same time many of them experience a significant increase in both sexism and ageism directed towards them. Sexism is characterized by negative, discriminatory prejudices, especially towards women, because of their gender (Gebben, 2015), whereas ageism is defined as a set of prejudices and stereotypes that discriminate and harm people due to their age (Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2018; Butler, 1969). The intersection of these two types of discrimination is called the "double jeopardy," which presents women's aging as a problem (Krekula, 2007; van Mens-Verhulst & Radtke, 2013), creates a gradual process of social exclusion and a reduction in their agency (Calasanti et al., 2006; de Travernier & Aartsen, 2019; Hebers, 2019).

The intersection of ageism and gender as a "double jeopardy"

Age as a cultural and social construct encapsulates specific cultural beliefs and norms that revolve around opposite poles: "Youth" marks the desirable age and is characterized by beauty, vitality, and strength, while "old age" is associated with fear of decline, disease, weakness, and death (Schwaiger, 2006). These beliefs and norms legitimize age discrimination and empower younger groups (Calasanti, 2007), turning aging from a natural biological process into a social problem. Ageism is more common than racism—discrimination based on race or ethnicity, and sexism (Ayalon et al., 2014; Levy, 2001). But Unlike racism and sexism, which are relatively stable discriminations, ageism is one that we may all encounter if we manage to grow up and age (Butler, 1969).

Ageism is a mostly negative social construct, that causes exclusion, especially towards the older population (de Travernier & Aartsen, 2019). It is ubiquitous in various areas of life, turning aging from a natural process into a social problem that is harmful to the older population (Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2018). Furthermore, ageism towards women, and their exclusion—that can be perceived as a lack of agency—is more severe than towards men (de Travernier & Aartsen, 2019; Krekula, 2007). Thus, the intersection of sexism and ageism makes women's aging more problematic than men's (Krekula, 2007). Although the popular social discourse positions women in late adulthood as beyond their peak and limits their options, they can also resist or change the discourse that combines femininity and aging with weakness (van Mens-Verhulst & Radtke, 2013). Women have the potential to develop agency (Wray, 2004). For example, many women enter this stage with a broad educational background and extensive professional training. Therefore, they can learn and develop additional skills, or realize a new identity based on a previous occupational identity (van Mens-Verhulst & Radtke, 2013). The women interviewed in this study write and perform spoken poetry, which is a new field of creative expression for them.

Spoken word poetry as a tool for social change

Spoken Word Poetry (SWP) is prewritten on paper but intended to be performed in front of an audience (Jones, 2020). The writing itself is done privately and allows processing and description of various personal experiences, both traumatic and confidential (Luna, 2016). It contains poetic elements such as rhyme, puns, and humor, which serve as esthetic aids to achieving legitimacy and authenticity. The next and main step—performing the SWP in front of an audience—is no less important than the text itself (Chepp, 2014, 2016; Jones, 2020). The presence and reactions of the audience are essential to the performance and to the creation of social change (Chepp, 2014; Somers-Willett, 2014). SWP is a performative poetry that deals with personal and social issues, such as family relations, sexuality and sexual identities, various kinds of discrimination, social protest, and more, and links art to social activism (Dill, 2013; Gregory, 2008; Somers-Willett, 2014). The combination of a poetic technique with emotional performance creates an immediate

connection with the audience, thereby fostering identification (Roche & Elizabeth, 2017). Exposing personal issues is challenging and powerful in its attempt to make the invisible visible and the imperceptible experienced (Endsley, 2009). This applies the concept of "the personal is political"—the understanding that personal problems are political (Hanisch, 2006). The break-through of the MeToo movement in 2017 has gradually led to the exposure of secrets and trau-mas that have been hidden for many years (Leung & Williams, 2019). Through SWP, these secrets can be revealed in a subtle manner (Luna, 2016). In addition, these revelations through a performative event may continue to exert influence beyond the moment itself, giving this art a significant potential to bring about social change (Roche & Elizabeth, 2017). The performance arena acts as a space of resistance in which socially disadvantaged groups can express pain and anger, talk about issues important to them, and challenge power structures through form and content (Davis & Hall, 2020; Somers-Willett, 2014). In this way, SWP expands beyond being an artistic activity to social and political activism (Chepp, 2014).

A review of studies on SWP shows that it is prevalent among many population groups, deals with a wide range of fields, and provides a path for personal expression, protest, or social resist-ance, even for marginalized social groups such as youth, queer populations, and people of non-white origin (e.g., Dill, 2013; Endsley, 2009). Very few studies deal with SWP women artists (Buckman, 2017; Kemphues, 2012). However, no studies have been found about advant-aged women who create SWP, or any that express social attitudes toward aging or social resistance to ageism through this poetry. This deficiency reveals a scholarly lacuna, and perhaps even ageism on the part of SWP research, which ignores these women. In an aging world, it is important to raise these issues in the public discourse.

As noted, SWP is a widespread artistic phenomenon known to the public and the academic world (Davis & Hall, 2020; Gregory, 2008). In Israel, however, this is a new phenomenon that arrived in 2012 (Ariel-Nahari, 2018), and advant-aged women who create and perform SWP in Israel are few. Most of them come to SWP workshops with a previous background in creative writing, while some have a background in theater and learn to combine the fields to perform their SWP on stage.

The aim of the study

The aim of the current study is twofold: the first is to define a new age group, which is called advant-age. This term aims to replace commonly used terms such as middle age or mid-life by stressing advantages and opportunities that come with more advanced age. The second aim is to uncover ways in which advant-aged women wish to lead social change. Therefore, the research questions enquire about the ways in which these women use SWP as an activist tool to change social discourse, and how they express their agency. We also examined how they expose personal, sensitive issues through SWP, thereby raising them for public discussion to create social change.

Method

This research is based on a qualitative paradigm that combines different fields of knowledge: Advent-aged women, gender, ageism and spoken poetry as a performative and activist art. The use of qualita-tive research methods through interpersonal interaction has the potential to add to our understanding of women's lives and the rich reality in which they operate and understand life. This creates a deeper familiarity with their complex worldview and offers newer perspectives (Herzog, 2014).

The research field and researched population

The population of this study includes twenty-one Israeli women aged 50-70 who write and perform SWP in Hebrew. According to these women, this period creates new opportunities for them, due to a reduction of responsibilities at home and less financial pressure, and greater freedom to decide what they want to do. This age range was chosen with the understanding that the position of this period in relation to society changes according to the constant increase in life expectancy (Dolberg & Ayalon, 2018). Exploring their experiences will make it possible to understand how they describe this period in their lives through SWP and how they use their poetry as an activist tool to change social perceptions.

Recruitment and the interview process

The participants in the study were recruited using the "snowball" method, until the data were saturated. This method consists of a personal appeal to potential research participants and a search for access to populations that are difficult to reach. It is carried out through circles of friends and acquaintance of "women who know each other" (Browne, 2005, p. 48). Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews (Herzog, 2014). The interviews opened a window into the interviewees' world: This afforded a deeper understanding of their perspectives on their lives and experiences: the processes that have led them to write SWP; the issues they write about; the ways in which they express them in their art; and meanings they attribute to these issues in their lives (Agee, 2009; Josselson, [2013] 2015). The data consisted only of interviews and no observations of SWP performances were made.

The data collection process consisted of three stages: In November 2021, two preliminary interviews were conducted. From July 2022 to January 2023, an additional nineteen interviews were conducted. In May and June 2023, repeated interviews were conducted with a small part of the research participants, with the aim of bringing additional research validity and depth to the phenomenon under investigation (Kranzler, 2012). (See Appendix 1 for the interview guide.) Examples of the questions asked in the interview are: What are you writing about; what does SWP allow you that is not possible in other ways, and what do you wish to achieve with it? Some of the interviews were conducted in face-to-face meetings and some through the Zoom app, which has become a cost-effective, convenient alternative to in-person interviews (Gray et al., 2020). In a comparison between face-to-face interviews and online interviews, it was found that the quality of the interviews did not differ, although the interviewees in online interviews were more open and highly expressive (Gray et al., 2020).

Analysis of the findings

The findings were analyzed through thematic analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). A theme is a feature, element, or concept as an implicit topic that organizes a set of repetitive ideas, allowing the researcher to answer the research question. The theme contains codes with common reference points and a high degree of generality that unites ideas about the subject of inquiry (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Coding is an analytical process that includes several stages in which the researcher returns to the interviewees' words, encoding them into repetitive ideas. This is a cyclical process without final interpretation, and the most mysterious and surprising in qualitative research (Ryan & Bernard, 2000; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Its purpose is to give meaning, interpretation, and generalization to the understanding of the phenomena investigated from the data collected (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). The goal was to analyze the women's narratives as they emerged from the interviews and understand how writing and performing SWP serves them in conveying their personal experiences to the audience. For example, some of the interviewees talked about the ways in which SWP allowed them to reveal secrets and traumas. The resulting sub-theme is "being heard to save others."

The position of the researchers in relation to the study

In many cases, the researcher has a personal interest in the research field (Gregory, 2009; Josselson, [2013] 2015). Indeed, this study stems from a personal desire to clarify the ability of SWP to change social perceptions, since the main researcher is herself an advant-aged SWP artist. Thus, the researcher's position relative to the research group is twofold: On the one hand, she and the interviewees are on the same side—part of the same age group and engaged in the same issue, SWP. On the other hand, however, they are located on both sides of the fence: The researcher conducts the interviews, and the participants are the interviewees, so there is a power relationship between them. Although feminist qualitative research seeks to abolish power relations and involve the interviewees in the research process, the researchers recognize their privileged status, the power they hold, and the connection between methodology and values (Agee, 2009), and must not abuse the power relations inherent in the interview (Harris, 2002). (See Appendix 2 for data availability statement.) The second researcher in the study is a gerontologist with extensive research experience who was not formerly familiar with the field of SWP.

The findings

The women participating in this study were born in the middle of the last century into a culture of silencing that has accompanied them throughout their lives. Now, in advant-age they are once again receiving social hints that they have completed their social role and are still being tasked with silence. However, contrary to expectations, these women are struggling to make their voices heard. Through SWP, they are speaking out about issues that have been silenced for many years, such as gender-based violence, and are using it as a tool for social action to create social change. Standing on stage, speaking out loud and exposing themselves, indicates their agency and resistance. The findings support this.

The themes that will be now described are: *"From silence to speaking out"*—the transition from a culture of silence to speaking out loud through SWP; *"to be heard to save others"*—SWP being used to expose stories of gender-based violence, to tell their personal experiences and warn other women; *"speaking out is taking responsibility"*—SWP serving as a way to take social responsibility and speaking out about issues that they think need to be corrected; *"It's my activist tool to influence"*—SWP as an activist tool for influencing the audience and society in general.

From silence to speaking out (Adi) (All names are anonymous)

The participating women, who were all educated in a culture which expected girls to be silent and not heard, describe how they moved from feeling mute or silenced to not only speaking and describing their experiences through SWP, but doing so loudly in front of an audience. Lily describes an experience of muteness:

> … I, in my experience, I was silent, […] I really felt that there was some kind of eclipse in … In speech […] and then, the more poetry I wrote, the more poetry I spoke-out […] I became words […] I could literally speak […] *And it was important for me to speak-out my words through my voice.* (Lily)

Adi describes the social silencing she experienced throughout her life:

> *For a long time, I felt silenced as a woman, as a woman in our patriarchal society, I felt silenced […] You understand this alone. […], Like it's a message that, I think, women get without anyone telling them explicitly […] You must be beautiful and silent, more or less. […] In my first job […] there was a very, very strong silencing and I also experienced sexual harassment. […] there it was really, it was very blatant. […] Even in the academy you are silenced without even knowing that you are silenced, because you simply see that all the faculty are men. […] Suddenly, I understood this silencing and its power. […] I started writing differently, yes, writing poetry, because I felt like I was dead inside if I didn't make a change, really!*

[…] At the time I was writing […] because of the connection with the audience […] *My writing started with the need to make a voice, and saying it verbally on stage is another step forward.* (Adi)

From the words of Adi and Lily, it can be understood that the SWP helped them to speak-out loud and express their distress.

To be heard to save others

The MeToo movement has opened a door of opportunity for women to share traumatic events in their past. For the women participating in this study—and others like them—SWP has become a tool of expression and a platform for revealing secrets that they hid for many years and did not dare to share even with other women and the closest people in their lives. In doing so, they are not only freeing themselves from the heavy secrets that have accompanied them throughout their lives; they also wish to teach from their experiences and warn others against gender-based violence. Carmel, who has created a show called "My Exodus" that includes SWP, talks about the violence she experienced in her marriage and her need to save others through her personal story:

> When I wrote the poem about the violence, it was very exposed. […] I had a need […], Someone was murdered again, and again the family said, "We didn't see, we didn't see." Yes, it drives me crazy, it drives me crazy, because my family didn't see either, like, no one wants to see someone they love in distress and… It was very important for me [to say], "It could be your daughter, and it could be your sister. […] I had a need to put on a show that brings awareness that violence […] I suddenly had a need to write about it, as it really burns in me […] to raise the awareness of women. And *I felt like I was on a mission*, yes, like […] *if I saved one girl with it, then I did my job*. When I brought up this show, it was like […] *to be heard to save others*. […] When I speak-out [I feel] that it's not only mine. Yes. There are those who identified in the audience […] and even if they don't identify, it will give them some kind of thought. […] It gave me a lot of strength […] which I probably needed at that moment. (Carmel)

Exposing one's personal story is not just for the sake of the story itself, but to alert and allow other women who may have experienced such violence to hear and be encouraged to come forward with their own stories. In addition, it creates a partnership of destiny, thus enabling and motivating joint social action. Through this exposure, the narrator transmutes weakness into strength. She transforms from being a victim, from a weakened, hurt woman - to one of power and social influence. Sharon tells how, through SWP, she revealed to her family a secret from childhood:

> … And that's something that really no one—not my parents, nor my sister, nor my girlfriends, nor my husband, nor anyone knew, because I just ignored that it had happened […]. It was traumatic for a 12-year-old girl. Yes, it wasn't, it wasn't a rape, but, but it was harassment, no, inappropriate and out of place […] *That's what Spoken Word Poetry did that nothing else had done until that time.* (Sharon)

When I asked Sharon how she felt that the audience reacted, especially the people who know her, she answered:

> There was my sister and […] my husband, and there were my friends […] and all they said to me afterwards: "Bravo for the courage" […] and I was shaking all over. Yes, just that. I was shaking all over. (Sharon)

Stories of sexual assault and domestic violence have long been silenced, but through SWP women are breaking the bond of silence imposed on them by patriarchal culture. Disclosure of personal experiences brings to light and normalizes silenced experiences, especially for women who have gone through or are going through similar experiences. This opens the possibility of social discussion about these issues. The process of bringing personal narratives into the social sphere may even encourage more women to reveal their secrets. Thus, through this exposure, not only personal healing but also social correction is possible.

Speaking out is taking responsibility

Advant-aged women receive many insinuations from society that their "time has passed" and that they need to give way to the younger generation. In contrast, these women explain that their role is not over, that they have social responsibility, and that it is important for them to speak-out; to take a stand and set an example of good civic responsibility; to lead social change for a better world and future. Adi explains:

> Speaking out is important, to protest things I don't agree with […] There's something else about raising a voice. I also think, really, it is my duty as a citizen to take a stand […] *I think that speaking out is taking responsibility … And taking a stand.* I think it's very important, it's an important civic act […] Not to just write it down for people to read. That's also speak-out, but *being on stage and talking about it is another raised voice.* (Adi)

Advant-aged women use SWP as a tool of expression commonly used by younger groups to make their voices heard and influence the young audience. This poetry is a platform where they can make bolder, blunter social statements. They believe that they can change social perceptions or prejudices through SWP. When asked whether women who perform SWP can be leaders, Adva replies:

> Yes, and they want to lead to a new place. They want to break conventions or pre-familiarity that people have with the meaning of words and with the contexts of words, and take the audience to a new place, allow a new context to be made […] and discover within them some uplifting idea or discomfort great enough […] so that he will take these words and think about where he is in the story. […] *We have life experience; we have social responsibility* […] *we have something to teach the young audience.* We do it with rhyme, with humor and puns […] With Spoken Word, suddenly a larger space opens up to say things. […] I want them [the poems] to shock, first of all, [that] they provoke thought where we sleep […], all the places where I feel there is some fundamental corruption. (Adva).

Repeatedly, these women emphasize the need to speak-out loud. They enter as mature women to a field that is mostly composed by and for younger people, as SWP is considered a young culture. by speaking to the audience, they wish to inspire social action. They use SWP to take a social stand, to warn of deficiencies, to correct society. From the words of the interviewees, it can be understood that "raising one's voice" is significant both in the symbolic sense—to express oneself—and in the practical sense—to express oneself and present oneself in the public sphere.

It's my activist tool to influence

The social contribution of advant-aged women SWP artists is made possible by both their life experience and courage. Their words indicate that they wish to present a mature, responsible view of reality. Neta, who has created a show based on SWP, says:

> And I remember once saying […] *I want to make the world better.* How? I think that if all people knew how to contain opposites, *the world would be better*, there would be no wars. What are wars? It's a struggle between […] Who is right? […] Which is correct? Is it sad or is it happy? […] If I can convey this message that it's sad and happy at the same time, *the world will be better. I feel like I can contribute to that.* And I believe that if people don't look for what is right and what is true, one or the other, if they understand it, *the world will be better.* (Neta).

Neta feels that it is precisely because of her age that she has a unique contribution to make and can teach the young audience a life lesson. The repetition of the idea - to make the world better, shows that she strives for higher goals. SWP becomes a tool for personal and activist expression, and through it these women wish to show the complexity of reality while raising social and political awareness. Lily talks about the spiritual development she has undergone following the SWP performances she has created, which deal with gender and the feminine experience in today's culture:

It's my activist tool to influence or touch […] that's spoken word poetry. […] Yes, and be inspired. Yes, yes, to arouse, touch, arouse, change, provoke thought too…, Also to emote, […] This is spoken word poetry. […] *Because it's important for me to influence, it's important for me to change.* […] Once I was ashamed to say […] the words "Tikkun Olam" […] as if there is something in me that feels, *I feel that it is like a calling* […] This is my work, […] my art in general and Spoken Word Poetry in particular, this art [is] an activist tool. *That's the definition* […] From this I say I am a "Shlichat Tzibur" (a public emissary). (Lily)

These women say that their social role is not over. They feel that SWP has the power to change social perceptions. Ilana, who has created a show that includes SWP, says:

I haven't finished creating, I still have a lot to say in this world, and every time I go on stage I do it with a big smile, with white hair and wrinkles. […] I really like the interaction between the mature woman and the young audience, and I think this is another example […] how you can grow up, grow old […] And I wish Spoken Word Poetry would become another tool that will empower people […] *We are the future*, completely, completely, clearly. I think this could even be the way to politics. [When] women speak-out loud on stage […] This exposure of women who speak-out loud, confidently, are not ashamed, ready to open up almost any issue. (Ilana)

From these statements it can be understood that age is not an obstacle but rather an advantage, and that for these women SWP is a way to carry out both a personal mission and social leadership. They refuse to cooperate with ageist views and their exclusion from society. By using their poetry as an activist tool, they wish to lead social change, and through this they express their agency and discover their power.

Discussion

This study reveals the unique aspect of this group: Advant-aged women who create SWP try to influence society in ways that, until now, have been perceived as pertaining to other groups. Studies show that this poetry is very common among adolescents and is taught as a pedagogical tool through educational institutions (e.g., Chepp, 2014; Davis & Hall, 2020) and among minority and marginalized groups, who use it as protest poetry (e.g., Dill, 2013; Endsley, 2009; Gregory, 2009). However, what distinguishes this group of women from other minority groups is that they do not see themselves as a minority. These are educated women from the middle class and above, and only because of their age and gender are they gradually being excluded from their social status. However, they literally refuse to step off the social stage.

These women, born in the middle of the last century, in a culture that encouraged them to remain silent. Nevertheless, SWP has become a tool for vocal expression aloud in front of an audience. SWP offers a voice to voices that have been silenced in the past, serves as a tool for bringing marginal narratives to the center, and provides space for experiences that have been marginalized or omitted from mainstream discourse, to challenge the hetero-patriarchal, misogynistic, racist lens. It offers marginalized populations a platform that can lead to social change (Chepp, 2016; Sohini, 2022). According to Audre Lorde (1984), poetry for women is not a luxury, but is essential to existence. Turning silence into language and action is an act of self-discovery, and it may be unsafe (Lorde, 1984). However, by exposing personal wounds, secrets, and traumas from the past it is possible to deal with the vestiges that remain, to express aloud what has not been said before, and simultaneously to put an end to the culture of silence and engage in dialogue with the social world (Luna, 2016; Muhammad & Gonzalez, 2016). By presenting their personal stories, these women make the personal public and political, and SWP serves them as an activist tool through which they can speak-out about silenced topics and stimulate social discourse. They allow the veil of silence and shame to fall away, and enable their audience to be a partner, to be moved by and with them, and to identify with the content the women present. By making their stories transparent, visible, and open, they are challenging the status quo, and the audience is asked to rethink accepted stereotypes and reduce fear and reluctance to engage with

these issues. In doing so, they are raising awareness of sensitive social issues in a digestible manner (Chepp, 2016).

Such exposure facilitates social dialogue about silenced topics that are seldom presented in public discourse. It is essentially a rebellious act through form and content (Clasen, 2011; Davis & Hall, 2020; Dill, 2013). This issue is important because a necessary part of activism is recruiting and leading others (Kemphues, 2012). During the performance, it is easy to see and hear the audience's reaction through the applause and verbal reactions. Although it is difficult to know the long-term impact of the performance, it is hoped that meaningful messages will resonate and continue to have an impact over time. According to Roche and Elizabeth (2017), SWP is accessible and allows for an immediate connection, while its influence gradually develops among the audience in the period after the show (Roche & Elizabeth, 2017).

The contents of the SWP are often rooted in the biographies of the artists. When they perform with their own words, they can control the contents and the messages. The narrative structure of this poetry is an effective tool for raising social awareness and creating solidarity, because women's personal stories and the shared collective narrative illustrate how sexism is systematically embedded in diverse social settings, such as the workplace, home, and bedroom (Chepp, 2016). Exposing narratives of gender-based violence is self-healing and acts as a political tool (Jones, 2020; Muhammad & Gonzalez, 2016). The phrase "the personal is political" is realized through the contemporary phrase MeToo: which stresses that personal problems are political issues, and what women describe from their own experience is part of broader patterns and social structures (Hanisch, 2006; Snuff-filpol, 2022). Through the performance of her SWP, the performer can transmogrify from a victim and a passive bystander to a survivor, emerging from a sense of helplessness to regaining a wish for action and social change (Jones, 2020; Muhammad & Gonzalez, 2016). Although they are in a gradual process of social exclusion due to their age, the interviews show that it is precisely because of their age and the period of life in which they find themselves, their experience, and the wisdom they have accumulated, that these women feel they have the power to contribute to society and lead social change.

These advent-aged women are taking advantage of their liminal status to get up on stages and speak-out, delivering poignant messages about society through SWP as an activist art. The performance space is perceived as a liminal space that makes it possible to challenge social power structures and create political change (Clasen, 2011; Dill, 2013; Sohini, 2022). Just as this space provides a way for youth, minority groups, and marginalized populations to engage in overt activism and gives them the confidence to see themselves as agents of change (Davis & Hall, 2020), so too this unique group can perform and influence in this space, by virtue of its open-door policy (Somers-Willett, 2014). Their liminal position and the performance of SWP within liminal spaces allow them to challenge societal norms (Somers-Willett, 2003; Yarnal, 2006).

According to Chepp (2016) it is easy to ignore the activism of women poets who perform SWP because it takes place in non-traditional spaces; but it has been found that, beyond the familiar methods of public protest, there are popular models of leadership that include the use of strategic humor, constructing feminist identity, sharing personal stories, and resisting stereotypes and accepted labels. These are possible forms of rhetorical activism. A reconceptualization of such activism leads to feminist modes of resistance that do not conform to traditional theoretical perspectives. Thus, women who perform SWP may be leaders of contemporary feminist movements (Kemphues, 2012).

Like teenagers who can become agents of resistance in striving to embrace self-determination and empowerment (Curwood & Jones, 2022; Somers-Willett, 2014), the women participating in this study also see SWP as a mission of social activism. However, they are trying to bring about social change in ways that, until now, have been perceived as pertaining to younger groups. They present great, lofty goals and even use the concept of "Tikkun Olam," a concept originating in Jewish tradition. In modern culture, this usually refers to statements of political involvement that

aspire to social justice and popular activism (Cooper, 2013). The women's statements indicate high aspirations which are not standard in the arena of SWP.

Advant-aged women are gradually being excluded from their professional and social status, but through the transformative performance art of SWP they are creating a space for themselves, reclaiming, and enhancing their social standing. They are trying to use their poetry to influence the audience and teaching the audience from their experience, thereby also carrying out rhetorical activism. SWP is being used as a resistance to stereotypes as well as a strategy for social change. As such, it can create popular models of feminist leadership and identity. In doing so, they are also carrying out feminist activism (Jones, 2020; Kemphues, 2012), even if they do not specifically identify as feminists. In this way, they are opposing their social exclusion and declaring: "We are the future."

Conclusions

Advant-aged women experience ageism and gradual social exclusion. This exclusion is sometimes invisible and imperceptible, but ageist statements and actions towards them make them feel that they have completed their social role (van Mens-Verhulst & Radtke, 2013). However, some advant-aged women feel that, far from being a hindrance, their age is rather the opposite. Unlike women a few decades ago who were nearing the end of their lives, they feel that they have been given extra time as a gift and see many advantages in this phase of their lives. Furthermore, they now have an opportunity to do things differently. Their liminal state—when they are in between, "neither young nor old," between family and social roles, and society has less influence over them—allows them to behave differently. Rather new possibilities are opening for them, including an ability to influence society and contribute to it from their experience. They are allowing themselves to speak-out and say things they could not say out loud at other times in their lives or in other ways.

They are challenging the societal attitude that "their time has passed," declaring that they still have something to say. They feel responsible for the society in which they live and understand that precisely at this stage in their lives they can contribute significantly. Through SWP, they hope to lead a change to a better world, even if the seeds they sow will develop slowly. In this act there is a double contribution. Through personal exposure, and by overcoming the silence forced on them in childhood, they are helping women like themselves and initiating a process of both personal and social healing, while simultaneously working to eradicate ageism. They are opposing the ageist discourse that pushes them to the margins of society and are refusing to step aside, declaring that they do not belong to the past but constitute the future.

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Appendix 1

Interview guide

I'm glad you agreed to be interviewed for my spoken poetry research. (Self-presentation: I am doctoral student in gender studies at Bar-Ilan University, and I myself write spoken poetry). I must record this interview. After I transcribe it, you can read it and consider whether there are things you'd like to delete.

Tell me a little about yourself: What stage are you at in life (family, work, career, other occupations)?

Writing

1. What elements in your life led you to write and perform spoken word poetry?
2. What does SWP allow you that is not possible in other ways? What do you wish to achieve through it?
3. What do you write about? What inspires you? What topics do your poems deal with?
4. Does your way of writing deal with the body: its transformation, signs of age, its capabilities?
5. Do you have poems about physical phenomena like menopause or sexuality? What is "allowed" and "forbidden"?
6. Have you written poems about COVID-19?
7. Do you ever write poems on unspoken topics, secrets, silenced or embarrassing topics, or topics you don't get to talk about with people close to you or friends? And if so, what are they? What kind of attention do you get from the people around you?
8. Do you feel that sometimes the poems bring out some deeper truth that doesn't come out in other ways, from revelation, even for you? What kind of feeling is that?
9. How does your family react to your writing? Do you perform your poems to them?

Age:

10. How do you define the stage you're at? Do you feel like you're "in between" periods? [work-pension; children-grandmothering; young-old]?
11. How far are you from retirement? Does it affect you in any way? How?
12. Do thoughts bother you about what the "next chapter" will be? And if so, how do you prepare for it?
13. Do issues of appearance, age, aging, wear and tear on the body concern you?
14. How do you feel about your age? Do you feel as if your age is holding you back, or are you being denied opportunities to do things you'd like?
15. How does age or this period of life affect you: Do you feel that age has advantages or disadvantages? Which?
16. How do these themes manifest themselves through your poetry?

Performances:

17. How do you feel after writing a poem and what do you want to do? Is it important for you to perform it?
18. To whom and how do you perform the poems: Do you read it to someone, record it, or take a picture of yourself performing it?
19. How important is it for you to perform and why?
20. When did you last perform in public? Where?
21. What experience did you have? What responses did you receive?
22. Have you tried to get to poetry slam stages? If so, where, and what were the reactions? If not, what's stopping you?
23. If you were rejected, why do you think it happened? Do you think your age or appearance has anything to do with it?

24. Would you like to perform again? When and where do you think this will happen?
25. As part of the research, I also want to watch your performance. Where can I watch you?
26. What part does SWP play in your future plans?

Conclusion:

27. What was your experience like being interviewed for my research? What made it so?
28. Would you suggest I change anything?
29. What made you assist me in this research? What made you agree to be interviewed?
30. What title would you give the interview? How would you define it?
31. Do you feel that something in this interview made you think differently about SWP?
32. Can you direct me to other women who write SWP so I can interview them?
33. Is there anything you want to add? Are there other things I haven't asked about, that we haven't talked about, that you'd like to add before concluding?

Appendix 2

Data availability statement

Data not available: The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.