

# Love burnout: young women, mobile phones, and delayed marriage in Yaoundé, Cameroon

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This article examines how work towards the promise of love marriage comes to be exhausted. It focuses on young urban women living in Yaoundé, Cameroon, trying to ‘catch’ a husband using digital technologies in which photographs figure prominently. Focusing on the visual production of dating profiles, I show how mobile phones place young women at the centre of their own husband-catching pursuits. Through digital actions, these young women produce the promise of love marriage, but at the same time their actions require increased volumes of emotional work. As phones constantly compel young women to intensify their husband-catching efforts and amplify the promise of love marriage, they rarely bring the desired results. Thus, young women, burdened by the emotional work necessary to sustain this promise, experience a form of love burnout, suspend their actions, and delay marriage. In highlighting the emotional laboriousness of intimate relations in technologically mediated worlds, this article draws out the limitations of the way in which the promise of love marriage is circulated and points to how neoliberal economies of affect may be temporarily suspended.

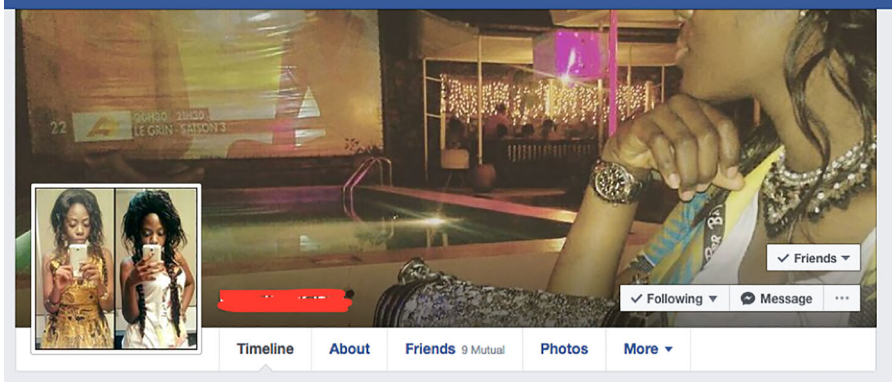
As another night approached, Mirelle lay in her bed, scrolling through the images on her phone, and opened her Facebook account (see Fig. 1). She had 400 Facebook friends, all people she knew, ranging from close to distant kin, from neighbours to peers from school and university. Apart from the omnipresent romantic or religious memes, commentaries on gender relations, and images of celebrities and stars, Mirelle’s Facebook wall was plastered with full or half-length portrait photographs of herself, ranging from everyday shots to life-cycle ceremonies. Most portrayed her alone, wearing fashionable styles, the dress details prominently shown. Different poses and gestures alluded to love and seduction. Mirelle carefully curated what to display and when, focusing on the effects she wanted to call forth in the audience the particular post was aimed at. She often emphasized how much work such curation required.

Whistling the romantic song ‘My Marriage’ by the Cameroonian group X Maleya, Mirelle altered one image after another with precision and skill using an editing app, adding layers to increase their attractiveness (see Fig. 2). First she brightened the skin tone. Then she worked on the contrast so her apparel stood out more. She then zoomed

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**Figure 1.** Facebook account profile pictures. (Used with the permission of the account owner and the person photographed.)

onto certain parts of her body, cutting out any intrusive details around them. In the last layer, she meticulously changed the background. Now, the image showed her on a beach at sunset. The shades matched the colours of her dress, creating a particular visual effect to enhance onlookers' attention (*bien marrier pour frapper*), to, as she put it, 'catch the eye'.

'What you show depends on how you want to make others feel', she explained. Pointing to the beach image, she said:

Here I zoom onto the boobs and cut the surrounding detail. This way I show my style but also make my body stand out, young men immediately will feel attracted. Here [Fig. 3], I change a background, my dress style is responsible, so it looks like you are working here, this could attract a more serious candidate, he will think this young woman is industrious.

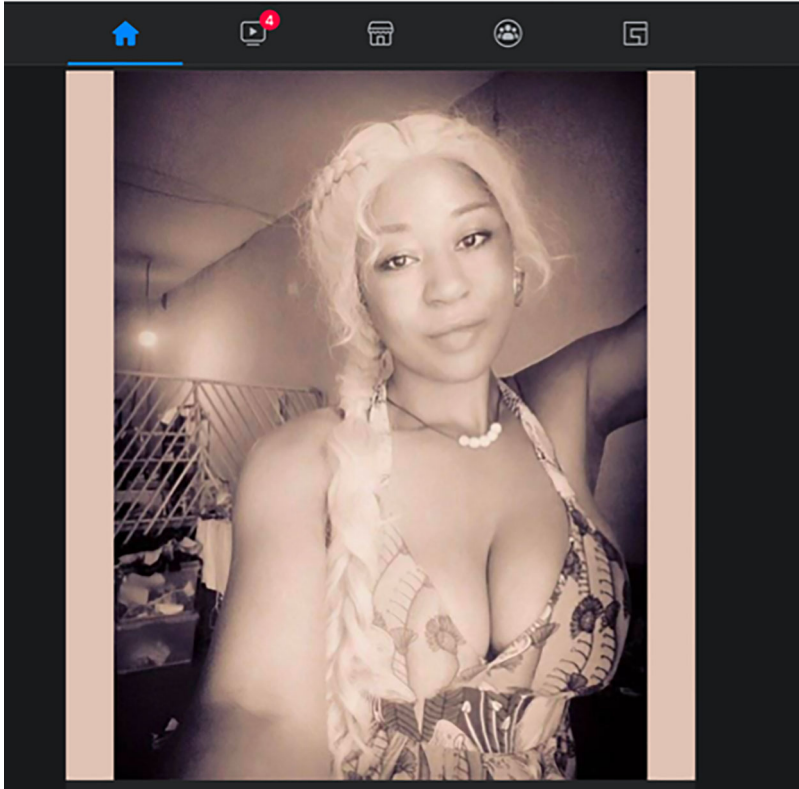
She continued, and uploaded new images on her wall:

To this Catch Number One I will send the images where I wear my new style and where I am sending kisses, that way he will feel wanted, this does not mean that I love him, but I try to make him feel like I do.

All the while, her phone kept buzzing, testimony to the likes her images were receiving, and soon she was busily carrying out conversations with several different men.

Alongside these conversations, she reworked another set of images, designed to elicit jealousy in her preferred partner: her Catch Number One. This was a former high-school friend who now lived in Montreal and called her 'every other day', which Mirelle read as his serious commitment towards their relationship, fitting her ideal of a 'couple that communicates' (*couple qui communique*). Recently, however, he had not given any sign of interest. It was true they had had a fight, she explained, but she had tried to resolve it by posting a meme that said: 'a perfect couple is not the one that does not quarrel but rather the one that manages its quarrels'. As this had not inclined him to talk, she had changed her approach, aiming to make him jealous to elicit a reaction.

These images mean: I'm laughing at you, I don't believe you, I'm doing very well, I'm in my place (*je suis à ma place*). This [Fig. 4] will make him jealous! He will ask himself: from where has she taken the money to dress fashionably like this?



**Figure 2.** Facebook account picture. (Used with the permission of the account owner and the person photographed.)

She reckoned he would write to her immediately. Yet, as the night continued, her attempts to get a response went nowhere. With no word from Catch Number One and exhausted by the repetitiveness of this situation, Mirelle, disappointed, went to sleep.

Young women like Mirelle use online media to undertake what they call ‘catches’ for a husband or a *gars*: a young man who cannot fulfil the affective duties and economic responsibilities of a proper husband, but at least tries. Following the question that young women repeatedly ask themselves, *comment attraper un gars ou un mari?* (how to catch a *gars* or husband), in this article I ask how young Bamileke women living in Yaoundé, Cameroon, mobilize digital photographs to fashion intimate relations, and, more generally, how increased access to digital media affects their work of catching a suitable candidate for love marriage.

More broadly, this article is concerned with the effects of the post-Cold War reforms in Cameroon, especially trade and media liberalization, on the livelihoods of urban young women, and particularly on their marriage prospects. I argue that, together with the decay of the political economy, the rise of digital media and mobile phones has led to young urban women burning out in their husband-catching work. Affordable android phones with cameras, coming from China since the 2000s, and cheaper internet access are central to this shift, for they position young women as entrepreneurial brokers of their own husband-catching work, and make this work



**Figure 3.** Photographs on Facebook wall. (Used with the permission of the account owner and the person photographed.)

mobile. Alongside kin who remind young women they should marry soon, but are less available as matchmakers, buzzing phones kept in pockets or under pillows amplify the promise of love marriage, whilst also constantly compelling young women to perform ever more husband-catching work. In doing so, phones transform husband searches into exhausting emotional labour, compounding the struggle to marry amidst a declining local economy and changing life-course possibilities for both women and men. In this article, I contribute to the literature on intimacy, affective economies, and digital technologies by showing how husband-catching work to contract an intimate premarital relationship through digital means produces the promise of love marriage and requires increased emotional labour. Ultimately, though, it leads to exhaustion with this work, or what I call 'love burnout', delaying the very relations digital means were intended to produce.

The young women with whom this article is concerned are all unmarried, aged 18 to 35 years, and trying to achieve social adulthood, which is contingent on economic resources, procreation, and marriage. All identify as Bamileke and trace their origins to Mbouda in the Grassfields, Western region of Cameroon (chiefdoms of Batcham, Bamissengue, Babajou). They define themselves as Christian and attend church irregularly. They are either enrolled in university or have been through university



**Figure 4.** Photographs on Facebook wall targeting a specific young man. These images mean (clockwise): I'm laughing at you, I don't believe you, I'm doing very well, I'm in my place (*je suis à ma place*). (Used with the permission of the account owner and the person photographed.)

education. All live in Yaoundé (*quartiers* of Biyem Assi, Ngola Ekele, and Efoulan), with kin, or on their own in rented rooms in the students' quarters. They usually sustain themselves from handouts from their kin, wealthier peers, multiple lovers (see also Pype 2020), and by circulating fashions. They belong to the urban lower-middle classes and, back home, their kin hold important positions in chiefdom hierarchies.

This article is based on doctoral fieldwork in Cameroon (November 2013 to June 2014 and March to June 2015) carried out with three research collaborators, Félicité Djoukouo, Annie Kamta Matsida, and Pamela Mikamb, using mixed methods, including participant observation, sixty semi-structured interviews with seamstresses, tailors, photographers, and their clients, photographic elicitation with women of three generations (i.e. young women, their mothers, and grandmothers), subsequent and ongoing digital ethnography with young women (via Facebook and WhatsApp), and ongoing collaboration with Félicité.

The fieldwork focused on young women's engagement with beauty, fashion, and photography. While these practices also have a homosocial dimension, here I am concerned with their heterosocial dimension, which is equally important yet, arguably, less fruitful. Although this article focuses on the story of a single interlocutor, her case is by no means an isolated one. Rather, it is typical of the young women I worked with. My

continuous close friendship with her yields rich details on how searches for husbands come to be doubted and suspended.

### The promise of love marriage

Most studies on the transformation of intimacy in Africa focus on textual or verbal means of mediating intimacy, love, and romance – movie plots, text messages, communication on a dating website (for exceptions, see Bosch 2020; Pype 2020) – leaving aside the domain of the visual, which is arguably key to communication with the advent of digital technologies (Illouz 2018; Miller 2011; 2016). As we saw in the opening vignette, Mirelle is deeply engaged in working on and displaying images of herself online over Facebook, as are young women in Kinshasa (Pype 2020), Tinder users in Cape Town (Bosch 2020), and others elsewhere. These digital actions, as Mirelle's example shows, require emotional work. Thus, we might approach the digital husband-catching work that Mirelle performs to establish premarital intimacy as emotional work.

Arlie Russell Hochschild (2003 [1983]) argues that emotional work is a particular type of performative technique wherein one manages one's own emotions and those of others to create market value, mastering which is itself additional and gendered work. Ahmed (2004) contends that emotions are not the property of subjects or objects – for my interlocutors, the images they make and display. Rather, emotions circulate to align bodies into certain ways of feeling. In doing so, emotions or affects function as a form of capital, constituting affective economies: here, the promise of marrying for love. This promise is an affective structure shaping young women's investments and desires and attaching them to happy objects (Ahmed 2014 [2004]: 24): here, love marriage. If the production of this promise entails making and posting new images, as Berlant (2011) argues, the affective landscape of late neoliberalism is characterized by the precarity of such promises.

Digital labour is a vector of such promises, as illustrated by the 'mamapreneurs' of the Rust Belt in the United States, where mothering amidst neoliberal economic precarity requires an 'affective modulation' to make up for failures of care and labour systems and to retain the promise of a happy family (J.A. Wilson & Yochim 2017: 17). Affective modulation is constantly enacted through mundane actions, such as posting edited images depicting happy kids to Pinterest, or writing positive blogs about reproductive work (rather than its burdens) to make ends meet while the kids nap. The digital merging of motherhood and entrepreneurship requires flexibility through affect. As the authors argue, '[M]amapreneurialism constitutes a relationship of cruel optimism between mothers and their families by obscuring the affective contradiction between neoliberal precarity and the promise of family happiness' (J.A. Wilson & Yochim 2017: 27). As Carla Freeman (2014: 3) has shown in her ethnography of women performing service work in Barbados, one manifestation of neoliberalism is the intensified emotional work seeping outside the boundaries of the market into other domains of life. In other words, entrepreneurship, or here lovepreneurship, becomes an affective way of life under neoliberalism, akin to a structure of feeling that intimately ties labour, performed for the market and underpinned by emotional labour, to the transformation of the self along the same principles (Freeman 2014: 2). This affective way of life is engaged in via digital means that work as cruel attachment, making young women go on despite all odds, yet the production of this structure of feeling entails ever-growing emotional, bodily work.

Drawing on these feminist approaches to affect (Ahmed 2004; 2014 [2004]) and emotional work (Hoschild 2003 [1983]) under neoliberalism (Berlant 2011; Freeman 2014; J.A. Wilson & Yochim 2017), I suggest the promise of love marriage in contemporary Yaoundé is sustained by, amongst other things, the circulation of signs and objects – photographs sent via social media – to align young female bodies into a certain affective way of life: ‘feeling lovepreneurial’. But these digital husband-catching actions ever increase the emotional labour required to sustain the promise of love marriage. The desired results do not appear, leading to the exhaustion of that way of feeling: what I call ‘love burnout’. In this, young women are *suspending* their attachment to the very promise of love marriage. In the work of sustaining attachments and trying to convert them into actual relationships, they themselves detach, whether temporarily or permanently (cf. Berlant 2011).

Through this ethnographic exploration, I contribute to this literature on intimacy, digital media, and neoliberal affective economies in Africa and beyond. I argue that husband-catching work becomes more emotionally laborious as the form of labour changes to become digital, which burdens young women to the extent that it can lead to love burnout, limiting the very relations it was set to produce. My interlocutors then suspend their searches and question the very possibility of love marriage. More broadly and conceptually, I contribute to the literature on neoliberal economies of affect, gesturing at their moments of suspension, limits, reshaping, and perhaps even abandonment.

The first section of this article outlines how the broader political economy of contemporary Cameroon shapes young urban lower-middle-class women’s marriage aspirations and prospects. The second section situates the digital among the means of contracting intimate relations to show how it leads to additional work to secure a marriage candidate. The third section examines the emotional work that these digital husband searches require and amplify. The last section discusses the effects of this increased work on young women’s marriage prospects, gesturing to how ever more burdensome work might be suspended or ended.

### The precarity of the promise

Mirelle, 25, had recently graduated with an accounting degree. She lived with her parents and three siblings in a big unfinished house in Nkolmisson, Yaoundé’s northeastern district. Her parents were in a monogamous union, sealed by both traditional and civil marriage. Her father was a teacher at a Catholic secondary school, her mother a clothes trader who rented a stand in the Bamileke-dominated Acacia market on the other side of town. Mirelle’s job hunt through her parents’ network had recently borne fruit, and she had just finished training (*stage*) at an aunt’s accounting office. The aunt did not offer her a job but Mirelle, aware of Cameroon’s economic decay, was unsurprised. Now, she spent weekdays helping her mother at the market stand, considering it for running her own business. As the eldest in the family, at the weekends she was busy cooking and cleaning, assisted by her younger sister, while her three brothers were often away and one was studying abroad. In between household chores, during taxi commutes, at slack times at the market stall, or in bed at night, Mirelle, like most of the young women I worked with, was glued to her android phone, searching ‘for fashions, jobs, and husbands’.

Work and a suitable husband, Mirelle explained, were important means of upward social mobility for her and her kin because, in Cameroon, ‘*la vie c’est la position*’.

Despite her accountancy training, Mirelle saw herself as running a business in the future, echoing the entrepreneurial ethos among Bamileke described in the literature (e.g. den Ouden 1987; Warnier 1993). Preferably this would be in the cosmetics trade, as then she could combine her interest in beauty, accounting skills, and sales experience. While migration was an option for young women of her socioeconomic background, especially for further studies and work, Mirelle knew that her family could not afford it, as they had recently spent considerably on sending her brother to study in Germany. Mirelle desired to marry someone of her own aspirational social and economic standing: for her, as for other educated women, companionate marriage remained a means of aspirational urban lower-middle-class making (Goheen 1996). She envisaged marrying what she called a 'serious' Cameroonian or African man, who combined 'knowledge of traditions' with cosmopolitanism and economic achievement, as embodied in the figure of the Cameroonian trader (*homme qui fait la ligne*) or successful African migrant living abroad (*mbenguiste*). Such a man, she reckoned, would be able not only to express his emotional commitment through the triple marriage she aspired to – traditional, civil, and church style – but also help her start her business (Cole 2010; Cole & Thomas 2009). Aware that marriages can collapse for any number of reasons, Mirelle still spoke of her marriage aspirations with a conviction that communicated her hope of achieving them.

The decay of the Cameroonian economy, political authoritarianism, and patronage and gerontocracy structures have compromised the possibility for many young men to afford the continuous economic resources (Honwana 2012) they need to fulfil their redistributive role for their own kin and towards young women and their kin in love marriage. These resources are expressions of affective commitment to young women, and are used for bridewealth exchanges with women's kin. They ensure the investment in the marital economy that young women expect, such as returns for their household labour and shared leisure. But such resources are affected by Cameroon's high unemployment going back to the structural adjustment programmes of the late 1980s (Bayart 2006 [1989]), when economic liberalization and privatization concentrated economic and political power in the hands of networks of elders from a single ethnic group, increasing the very inequalities they arguably aimed to end (Konings 2011). Soon after the Cold War ended in the early 1990s, the currency was devalued. State, civil, and parastatal salaries, which had long been deemed secure, were halved, and payments constantly deferred. This rendered the state-related patronage and gerontocratic networks and 'bigmanship', through which young men could rise, increasingly unreliable (Nyamnjoh 1999). Urban economies shrank as a viable ground on which young men could build their adult lives and married futures, albeit to different degrees depending on the configurations of economic and social means amongst their kin (Guyer 1993), as well as their own industriousness (Warnier 1993).

In this context, the appeal of migrant work in neighbouring countries, such as Nigeria or the Ivory Coast, or emigration to Europe, the United States, South Africa, Dubai, or China, took on particular allure (Nyamnjoh & Page 2002). Most young men dream about and search for economic opportunities abroad, often at considerable cost (Alpes 2016; Kovač 2022). Those who do make their way abroad are imagined to be better positioned to build married futures. In the 1990s, Jennifer Johnson-Hanks (2007) described young urban women in Yaoundé using dating websites to marry white men from abroad; by 2015, these women, like their counterparts in Kinshasa (Pype 2020), searched for Cameroonian or African *mbenguistes* or *hommes qui font la ligne*. This



is also related to popular culture representations (such as the hit film *Blanc d'Éyenga*) that devalorize women searching for white men as desperate – as having failed in their local searches – and portray white men as lacking the economic means they promise. The appeal of white men is considered to persist among rural and less-educated women and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, while African men living or trading abroad have distinction for young urban educated women like Mirelle.

Post-Cold War economic and political turmoil (Piot 2010) led to many marriages being shaken, rejected, or ended; women often invested in sexual economies (Cole 2010; Hunter 2010) as husbands failed to deliver their economic obligations, such as paying their share of children's schooling, providing cooking ingredients, or gifting women the textiles through which love in marriage in Cameroon was and still is expressed (Cole 2010; Goheen 1996). Indeed, as Mirelle's mother told me, if her own marriage still lasted, it was because her husband showed love (*amour*): he not only paid bridewealth, but also contributed to the household economy and offered returns for her household labour in the form of cash, textiles, and other gifts.

An influx of cheap commodities from the 2000s – especially cosmetics, hair extensions, and textiles from China – brought new economic opportunities, especially for young women. It reinvigorated the work of seamstresses, hairdressers, and beauticians, but also more upscale jobs as hostesses in bars and hotels. Meanwhile, the availability of digital devices and falling internet costs transformed long-distance trade, bringing new opportunities for small-scale female sellers of fashionable garments and, for young women like Mirelle, as fashion influencers. Yet young women continue to expect young men to express their affective commitments in premarital and marital relationships in economic terms. In doing so, like their urban Beti counterparts, they articulate long-standing conceptions in West Africa more broadly, wherein love is expressed through economic means (Cole & Thomas 2009) and marriage is seen as a labour exchange, with 'purses kept apart' (Fortes 1949). But, unlike their Beti counterparts (Johnson-Hanks 2007), young women like Mirelle conceive their conjugal futures to be based not only on shared leisure but also, as women of previous generations did, on shared business (Goheen 1996) – as Mirelle's expectations of her future husband's investment in her future trade indicates. As she liked to remind me: 'For us Bamileke, marriage is an enterprise' (*Pour nous Bamileke, mariage c'est une entreprise*).

Moreover, marriage matters, despite its uncertainty, and is desired by young women and men alike because of the social recognition, belonging, and onset of respectable social adulthood it affords in Cameroon (Fuh 2006; Warnier 2007), as elsewhere (e.g. Carsten 2021; Papadaki 2021). For aspirational lower-middle-class women like Mirelle, married respectability is also tied with social reproduction and childbearing in wedlock as articulated through chieftdom, state, and church discourses (Nyamnjoh 2002; Warnier 2007). As young women repeated, 'If you are not married, you are not respected here' (*si tu n'est pas marie, on ne te respecte pas ici*), regardless of education or independent economic means. Indeed, amongst Bamileke, and in Cameroon in general, unmarried women and men mostly remain social juniors (Warnier 2007), independently of class and status markers deriving from Christianity and urbanity. They are attributed lower-ranked roles at chieftdom-related ceremonies, and kept backstage for parts of weddings, funerals, and family reunions. Unmarried, economically successful urban women past what is considered 'proper' reproductive age (25–35) and with no offspring might risk association with witchcraft and prostitution. While unmarried, urban women in previous generations could achieve social validation

by holding an important role in the church or chiefdom; for today's young women in Yaoundé, this is less of an aspiration. Rather, for women of Mirelle's age and socioeconomic background, companionate marriage remains a desirable path to upward social mobility, promising respectable social adulthood, belonging, and social recognition. Thus, most young urban Bamileke women invest considerable labour in catching a husband or a *gars*. Against the background of a decaying political economy, migration, and decline in marriages, we might ask how young women sustain this promise.

### The forms the promise of love takes

One Sunday evening, the family gathered at Mirelle's parents' house to discuss the marital problems of one of her aunts. Throughout the evening, Mirelle, assisted by two female cousins, served the many guests, who were engaged in heated debate about the aunt's decision to leave her house, husband, and children. As food was eaten and beers drunk, another aunt started to get ready to return to her home in Douala. Before dinner, she had come to the kitchen and questioned Mirelle at length about, amongst other topics, her marriage prospects and job – an interrogation Mirelle later described as pressurizing. Now, just before heading to the door, the aunt went to the shelf and pulled out a photograph from an album she had looked through earlier. In the photoshopped studio photograph, Mirelle posed in front of the Presidential Palace in Yaoundé, wearing a voluminous *ensemble* dress and sporting a long *rasta* hairstyle. 'I will search for a husband for you [with this]!' the aunt exclaimed, waving the photograph. Mirelle's mother called her daughter from the kitchen, where she had spent most of the day, to double-check that the chosen photograph was an attractive image. Examining it closely, the older women agreed, in approving tones: 'Your photograph is good' (*Ta photo est bien*). Mirelle photographed the image with her phone camera to keep a digital copy for her own use. The aunt put the physical copy in her bag, said her goodbyes, and left for the bus station.

If Mirelle's aunt took the photograph to search for a husband for her niece, it was because the aunt's own kin had found her a suitable husband in this way. For women of that generation, who married at the height of the rural-urban migration of the 1980s, kin often brought a photograph of a man back to the village where the woman resided. These photographs depicted men inserted in relatively prosperous urban economies. They typically showed well-dressed men in suits, with a briefcase evoking a civil servant or a man of wealth obtained through successful commerce (see Fig. 5). Many women of Mirelle's mother's generation recalled their fear about moving to unknown cities, far from their kin. When these images were shown to young women, at a particular moment specially prepared beforehand, they were meant to dissipate fears at parting from kin and uncertainty about married life. The image was meant to solicit attraction towards the young men depicted, making a promise of the emotional investment such men could offer, to young women and their kin, through economic means.

Today's matchmaking images are both different from and similar to those of the urban men who sent their photographs back to the villages at the height of rural-urban migration. Contemporary photographs differ insofar as they showcase women to a greater extent. To be sure, female physical looks were, and are, important in marriage negotiations. Women of rare looks, or with features considered beautiful, such as a lighter skin tone, gaps between front teeth, or, in earlier days, erotic scarification (Ongoum 1979), were and are given higher bridewealth. This is because appearance



**Figure 5.** Older women who married at the height of rural-urban migration (c.1960-80) often laughed at this image which was used in the context of marriage negotiations. It depicted an urban man ‘in a suit but his pockets are empty’, referring to the limited earnings urban dwellers had. (Photo: Jacques Toussele, Studio Photo Jacques, Mbouda, Western Region, Cameroon, c.1980.)

exercises attraction, which, through a satisfactory sex life, is considered to make marital relations stick. Or as the marriage song has it: ‘beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, you won’t be able to leave her’ (*jolie, jolie, jolie, jolie, tu ne peux pas la laisser*).

Female appearance and physical attractiveness as traits that make marriage happen and stick have gained more traction in recent years. This has to do not only with the social media young women use to catch husbands, in which the visual is the primary mode of communication, but also with the local and global visual regimes wherein beautified commodified bodies are promoted as central to female social ascent within marriage and outside it (Dosekun 2020). But images of young women in fashionable dress also reveal them as skilled in navigating urban economies, and testify to their insertion in local digital economies – however partial and precarious – by circulating fashions and becoming fashion influencers, and using their networks, skills, and resources to get outfits and images made in the first place. As such, these images promise an industrious urban wife who is able to navigate the challenging conditions of post-Cold War Cameroon.

Later that day, when I asked Mirelle what she thought about her aunt’s proposal, she asked rhetorically: ‘How to catch a husband or a *gars*?’ (*Comment attraper un mari ou*

*un gars?*). ‘It will increase my chances’, she offered, with a murmured complaint at the pressure from kin about marriage, exemplified by the many enquiries she had received that day. While church and village ideologies articulate love marriage and partner choice in different terms – the former as an individual choice wherein the economic and affective dimensions are exclusive, and the latter as a collective pursuit involving kin, wherein the economic and affective dimensions are entwined – young women consider these as complementary ways of understanding marriage (cf. Archambault 2017). Amidst the economic uncertainties of contemporary Cameroon, it is far from sure which relationship will lead to a stable union with the best and most serious candidate. Thus, today, young urban women simultaneously manage several ‘infrastructures of intimacy’ (A. Wilson 2016), such as kin networks and social media networks. They do not consider navigating several relations as antithetical to finding a unique partner: indeed, these help eliminate candidates who fit their ideal less well, and increase the chance of finding the one. In other words, they work to increase the chance of finding the best marriage candidate in uncertain conditions by accumulating their ‘wealth in prospects’ (Guyer 1993; Johnson-Hanks 2017). But this also implies having to manage more relationships, stitch more dresses, and take and edit more photographs. Put simply, it requires more work (cf. Pype 2020).

That, today, it is young women who search for their ideal candidate speaks of individual partner choice, but also of the availability of new tools – android phones – that position them as brokers of husband-searching enterprises for themselves and, at times, their sisters and (more often male) peers. Young men initiate such serious searches less owing to the difficulties they face in securing work and bridewealth. Close female kin remain involved in searches offline and online, but to a lesser degree than before, and this is an object of young women’s dismay. This lesser engagement is because close female kin may live in other areas than young women, may have poorer-quality mobile phones or are not tech savvy, or are busy making money and attending to family duties. Today, it is mostly young women like Mirelle who, between household chores or at night, edit digital images they take themselves, or digitally photograph printed photographs taken by others, to edit and circulate through their social networks. With the best candidates residing abroad or constantly on the move, digital devices are a way to reach them in an instant. Cheaper mobile phones (around 10,000 FCFA, i.e. €15) have been available in Cameroon since the millennium, mostly from China, and low internet costs (10,000 FCFA per month could buy a daily allowance of 1 GB in 2016) enable them to circulate photographs at home and abroad. If Mirelle constantly asked herself *comment attraper un mari ou un gars*, revealing her uncertainty how to do it on her own, this doubt is also related to the additional work that digital husband-catching produces, and that women have to learn to cope with.

### The work the promise of love takes

On another evening, Mirelle uploaded newly crafted images to Facebook in a particular order she considered appealing. Yet she quickly became frustrated, enervated, and disappointed. Another young woman had uploaded photographs a few minutes earlier, showing herself in fashionable styles that Mirelle found enchanting. She scrolled through congratulatory comments from other young women from her university class and started questioning me about the images she had uploaded. She asked what I liked and disliked about her dress and photographic styles, explaining at length how she had worked on their details to make them unique. By the end, she was doubting if

she should keep them at all because they did not make her look so good. Ultimately, she decided to post them and later considered this a good decision because her phone kept buzzing with 'likes' and messages. Yet there was still no reaction from Catch Number One.<sup>1</sup> Our conversation turned to figuring out how to respond, when, and to whom. This went on for hours until Mirelle, disappointed that neither Catch Number One nor her serious Catch Number Two had reacted, and exhausted by carrying on multiple conversations at night, concluded: 'It was easier for our mothers.' Her eyes closed for sleep.

The centrality of emotions to how premarital and marital intimacy are envisaged and practised is a prominent theme in popular culture, echoing Christian and Pentecostal church training for women on how to have a successful marriage and the role of the future wife therein. The expression young women use, to 'catch' a husband or a *gars*, comes from 'Poisson fumé', a popular song by the Cameroonian female pop star Mani Bella. The song compares men to the dried fish sold in markets across West Africa, which is known to break apart easily. Therefore, the song advises, men should not be directly challenged about their whereabouts at night but instead 'gently and indirectly' addressed only once they are served food and have felt the 'comforts of home' (White 1990), underlining the importance of good communication for a successful marital couple. The song asks women to be more attentive to their own emotions (manage their anger at their husbands' repeated absences at night), as well those of men (avoid asking questions that might ignite their anger). Thus, popular culture as well as church discourses and Bamileke gendered personhood ideologies (Feldman-Savelsberg 1999) in Cameroon, as elsewhere, naturalize emotional work as female work, and make it central to the successful management of love relationships (Illouz 1997).

As Mirelle's reaction to her competitor reveals, many young women are engaged in similar pursuits. Differently from the networks of female older kin, who veiled their matchmaking in secrecy, Facebook makes competition public (Gershon 2012). As a result, these circulating images of others increase doubt whether one's attempts at husband-catching will actually work. Emotional work not only involves managing the emotions of others, it also increases dealing with the emotions of the self (Hochschild 2003 [1983]). Pulling one's phone out of a pocket in response to a buzz might reveal an image or comment from a competitor, rather than a message from the catch at whom new images were aimed. Receiving a nasty message about a dress which received multiple likes can easily put one's reputation into question and even deter potential candidates. As phones buzz incessantly in hands, pockets, or under pillows, the promise of love marriage conjured by circulating images on Facebook compels young women to compare, judge, and question their own and each other's skills and styles. The sheer ubiquity of phones, young women's repetitive visual digital actions, and the similar images seen over a fellow passenger's shoulder in a shared taxi reverberate (Karatzogianni & Kuntsman 2012) doubt. They are compelled to perform more emotional work to dispel these fears, in addition to the emotional work already required to deal with pressures from kin, which can also be exerted via messages on Facebook, texts, or phone calls. To keep going requires dedicating new periods of the everyday, and new spaces where young women spend their lives, to husband-catching work. In doing so emotional work underpinning lovepreneurship constantly spills over to other spheres of life (Freeman 2014).

Young women work to constantly increase the volume of images to make their profiles pop. These images partake of affective economies of the promise of love

marriage wherein by making and posting each new image of themselves, young women hold out for the possibility that a potential catch could be found or maintained via digital means. But this, in turn, requires ever new volumes of textiles for photoshoots, new hair extensions, and finding new sources for inspiration for posing and styles. While Mirelle used her phone to create images, others borrow computers and draw on the skills and advice of male peers. Photography remains a male profession, so some befriend young men working in photographic studios or cybercafés to learn the skills of display. As young men, women reckon, they know the 'sweet words' that will make their brothers fall in love. Young women observe them at work, or sit with them at their computers as they edit the images, but only flirt with them reluctantly. They do not consider these young men as potential husbands because they aspire to find men with higher economic and social positions, working or living abroad. Instead, these befriended men may initially manage their Facebook profiles, while the young women learn both editing skills and the 'sweet words' considered necessary to maintain conversation and attraction. Usually, they learn quickly and, after a few visits, know how to crop and cut backgrounds, lighten their images, and increase contrast. Subsequently, young women mostly curate their profiles themselves using their mobile phones, without having to leave home, but periodically return to the studios or their male friends for further 'technical love advice' (*conseil technique*) and to ensure these young men keep their husband-catching enterprises concealed. To keep performing their husband-catching work, they thus have to steer their male friends away from unwanted courtship, again adding to their emotional work.

To be sure, emotional work was also part and parcel of older women's husband-catching enterprises, but it was differently distributed. Back then, while matchmaking remained concealed, the work of eliciting feelings of attraction of young women and men and managing feelings of fear was often done by a network of close female kin. Today, where close kin are not available, but still nag young women to marry soon, and female peers are digital rivals, young women largely bear the burden of digitally amplified emotional work on their own (J.A. Wilson & Yochim 2017).

### Love burnout

For young women, posting new images aligns their bodies into feeling lovepreneurial, and they post ever more images to sustain the promise of love marriage. Young men, in turn, respond to such displays because, through repetition and the interchangeability of images flickering on their phone screens, they are aligned into the feeling of a promise of an ideal wife for a love marriage; buzzing android phones in jean pockets keep this amplified promise within reach. They respond to these digital displays with urgency, and many interrupt their duties and leave tasks unfinished to respond immediately to the seductive images they are sent privately, and the passionate messages or romantic memes that appear publicly on their Facebook walls. Many wire their female suitors money and other gifts on request so as to continue the intimate digital exchange, often in view of arranging a meeting that young women then defer. While neither young women post nor young men read these images solely in terms of marriage prospects, many young men openly say their ultimate aim is a serious encounter leading to marriage. Yet most of these relations have not involved even physical encounters. Nevertheless, young men offer their economic resources in return for the promise of often-deferred meetings and potential sexual exchange, expressing an affective commitment through material means.

Thus, affects and feelings accumulate and amplify as capital through the circulation of photographs in economies of affect, generating economic benefits in return (Ahmed 2004). These digital displays resemble contemporary strategies of advertising, marketing, and branding, requiring skills of display. Indeed, like advertisements, digital photographs are crafted surfaces the production of which requires constantly increasing volumes of labour – of making new dresses and making one's body look good, making, editing, and uploading images – which is appreciated and recognized as such. Thus, rather than producing economies of bluff (Newell 2012), circulating images produce affective economies of crafted surfaces wherein 'form follows emotion' (Postrel 2003). Such skills of display also mediated Mirelle's aunt's marriage: where and when the photograph of a young man was displayed to the aunt back in the 1980s was meant to increase its appeal. Today, eliciting attraction requires not the persuasive verbal skills of kin, but mastering written 'sweet words' and, above all, making images. This in turn involves adding layers of attractiveness (Deger 2016): arranging or displaying images so as to call attention to oneself in a competitive 'attention economy' (Fuh 2009; Williams 2018) to elicit and maintain particular feelings – love or jealousy – in self and other. To succeed in her online pursuit, Mirelle had to be skilled at display, or what Walter Benjamin called the 'display value of commodity' (in Buck-Morss 1991), in how she visually objectified and packaged not only her body but also, crucially, her own and others' – young men's – emotions into the display value of commodity, generating affective or immaterial value, and drawing monetary and other benefits in return. As such, digital husband-catching not only reveals young women's beautified bodies and the skills necessary to produce them, but also participates in wider dynamics wherein emotional work, and affective or immaterial value (Ahmed 2004), generate capital accumulated in the digital age (Illouz 2013).

Through digital husband-catching, young women articulate premarital relations as the union of two individuals who choose each other out of love, and as courtship in a view to marriage. Yet their actions also reveal husband-catching as more akin to an advertising or branding enterprise, necessitating skills of editing and visual display, as well as money, time, and the management of social and economic resources, such as befriending young men to learn visual editing skills and 'sweet words'. Other work includes navigating relations with kin from whom to get money to buy textiles, or collaborating with a seamstress to design and produce a fashionable style. These increased demands of husband-catching work are squeezed between other household chores and duties, and often take place at night. Thinking through love and intimacy as lovepreneurship brings us back to Mirelle's remark: 'For us Bamileke, marriage is an enterprise'. And, as digital enterprises, the constant availability of the phone renders laborious work more relentless and mobile, effectively aligning young women's bodies to perform it at new times and in new places, revealing the digital marriage market and its attendant emotional work as an extendible 'workplace' (Freeman 2014; Jarrett 2015).

Mobile and individual lovepreneurship intimately ties together emotions, work, and self/body (Freeman 2014), and relies on sustaining affective modulation (J.A. Wilson & Yochim 2017) to keep the affective economies of the promise of love marriage working. Recall the lack of response from Mirelle's Catch Number One. On the one hand, through seduction work, young women produce, solicit, and maintain their own and men's hope of love marriage, receiving money, gifts, and services that confirm affective investments in possible premarital exchanges. On the other hand, to young women's dismay, and despite all the work that went into them, these digital intimate

interactions have not transformed into desired marriages. This is attributed to, amongst other reasons, what young women consider a lack of serious affective commitment by young men: their lack of economic means and the shame resulting from this – as well as the continued involvement of parents in marriage negotiations, whose views on partner choice must be followed out of respect. When digital husband searches are framed, in Mirelle's terms, as 'increasing a chance' to find a husband, echoing her counterparts in Kinshasa (Pype 2020), their chanciness increases the demands of digital intimacy and the emotional work that accompanies it. By posting yet more photographs, by continually engaging in new conversations in spite of no results, young women attach themselves to 'compromised conditions of possibility'. This attachment to digitally mediated husband-catching work is cruel, for these practices 'contribute to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place' (Berlant 2011: 21), drawing young women back repeatedly to make and post ever more images. In doing so, they are perpetuating the promise that a young woman can catch a husband by circulating digital images of herself and the promise of love marriage.

Thus, young women's emotional work is a kind of 'affective modulation' as an attitude towards converting challenges related to downturns in the political economy into an opportunity (J.A. Wilson & Yochim 2017: 27). Yet it also raises questions about its limits and ends. If affect is mobilized to facilitate the transformations of the self (Ahmed 2014 [2004]; Freeman 2014), in the form of work on images sent over Facebook and encouraging women to become ever more lovepreneurial in their husband-catching, attending to this affective labour as bodily and emotional work points to its limits. Affective modulation becomes exhausted through the sheer labour it requires and the lack of the results it was set to produce. The volumes and different kinds of labour invested in making one's profile pop amplify the disappointment. 'Tired, I stopped' (*fatigué, j'ai arrêté*), said Mirelle, opening her arms wide in a gesture of powerlessness and despair, submitting, against her will, perhaps, to the idea that she might end up not marrying the best candidate for love, and would have to compromise. To be sure, this compromise is already embedded in the phrase young women use referring to their digital searches: recall they want to 'catch a husband or a *gars*' – not a socially adult man but a young one, who might not ever be able to fulfil the affective duties and economic responsibilities of a 'proper' husband. While Mirelle managed to get some monetary and other benefits through the multiple short-lived digital relationships she engaged in via Facebook, none of the young men proved to be such a *gars*, let alone 'serious'. The photograph her aunt took to Douala was never shown to the candidate, who had meanwhile 'fallen to the bush' (migrated abroad), and whose Facebook profile Mirelle was unable to find. The aunt halted negotiations without further explanation and Mirelle's own Facebook relationship with Catch Number One bore no fruit. He rarely called and did not return to Cameroon despite his promises. Or perhaps he returned without telling her.

As phones kept buzzing with new messages, images from competitors, and phone calls about their married futures from kin, Mirelle asked herself, 'Will I ever marry?' (*Je vais me marier un jour?*). To produce the promise of love marriage under contemporary Cameroonian conditions of economic and political decay and intense transnational migration entails deferment of a promise (Berlant 2011) underpinned by exhausting emotional work. Such work tires out young women and can lead to love burnout, as Mirelle's powerlessness reveals. Rather than producing new forms of intimate relations,



which Katrien Pye (2020) calls ‘digital marriages’, the tiredness resulting from the laborious demands of digital intimacy exhausts lovepreneurial feelings and makes young women question – temporarily or permanently – the promise of marriage, and of love marriage in particular. To be sure, this also relates to their ideal of a husband, which is hard for young men to live up to. However, the volume of work invested in the digital making of premarital relations is increasingly daunting and is performed alone. In other places, the digital work to contract intimacy is outsourced to new businesses that provide online dating assistance to help make one’s profile pop (Rochadiat, Tong, Hancock & Stuart-Ulin 2020). But in urban Cameroon, young women manage their profiles alone. This burdensome work can, at times, limit the relations it was meant to produce, gesturing at broader questions not only about the future of marriage, but also about gendered norms being reordered under late capitalism (Davidson & Hannaford 2022). While some women of their mothers’ generation rejected ‘traditional’ marriage (Goheen 1996), young women in post-Cold War Cameroon remain desirous of marriage for intimacy, upward social mobility, and social recognition. Yet the same emotionally laborious digital actions that produce the promise of love marriage lead them also to temporarily suspend their searches, gesturing at the cyclical nature of cruel optimism and attachment (cf. Berlant 2011).

Bringing together feminist frameworks on affect (Ahmed 2004; 2014 [2004]; Berlant 2011) and emotional work (Hochschild 2003 [1983]) to bear on the Africanist and anthropological scholarship on youth cultures of love in Africa, I argue that if young women keep on investing in husband-catching over Facebook despite not obtaining the desired results, this is related precisely to how neoliberal economies configure affect via digital means (Berlant 2011). What I call love burnout is conceptually related to the particular form of work in which husband-catching takes place, arguing for a recognition of moments of suspension of neoliberal economies of affect that gesture at their limits, reconfigurations, and perhaps even abandonment. In other words, in the work of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility, young women begin to detach themselves not only from the modes of work that constitute the attachment, but also the promise of love marriage towards which the attachment is geared. As such, love burnout is an invitation to move towards examinations of temporalities of neoliberal economies of affect related to intimacy and beyond. Indeed, young Bamileke women’s suspension of digital husband-catching resonates with other instances of similar suspensions worldwide, revealing a broader conjuncture of how love, emotions, and work configure possibilities for intimacy in neoliberal times, and are brought into sharp relief via digital means.

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### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Whereas social media can in theory allow one to see responses in real time, in Cameroon this is qualified by the need to have sufficient phone credit and a working internet connection. Young women try

to circumvent this by observing and decoding the patterns of responses of their potential catches, and post accordingly. Here, for example, Mirelle knew that Catch Number One usually responded at this time as he was on his way to work, and that he usually responded immediately. Being able to see responses (or their lack) in real time is another point of difference compared to kin networks, and can add to the emotional costs of the husband-catching enterprise.

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## Surmenage amoureux : jeunes femmes, téléphonie mobile et mariage différé à Yaoundé, au Cameroun

### Résumé

Cet article examine l'épuisement auquel peut mener la recherche d'une promesse d'un mariage d'amour pour de jeunes citadines camerounaises vivant à Yaoundé, qui tentent « d'attraper » un mari à l'aide des technologies numériques et en particulier de photographies. L'autrice montre, à partir notamment de la production visuelle de profils de rencontre, comment les téléphones mobiles placent ces jeunes femmes au centre de leurs propres opérations de chasse au mari. Bien que leurs actions numériques aboutissent à la promesse d'un mariage d'amour, elles nécessitent en même temps un travail émotionnel accru. S'ils poussent sans arrêt à intensifier leurs efforts pour attraper un mari et amplifier la promesse d'un mariage d'amour, les téléphones donnent rarement les résultats souhaités. Surmenées par le travail émotionnel nécessaire pour faire vivre cette promesse, ces jeunes femmes connaissent une sorte de « burn-out » amoureux, cessent leurs recherches et remettent leur mariage à plus tard. En mettant en lumière l'effort émotionnel qu'exigent les relations intimes dans les univers médiés par la technologie, l'article montre les

limites de cette façon de faire circuler la promesse du mariage d'amour et souligne comment l'économie néolibérale des affects peut être temporairement suspendue.

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