

## Editorial: Gendered Cultures in Platform Economies—Entertainment, Expertise, and Online Selfhood

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### Abstract

This thematic issue examines the gendered dimensions of platform economies, focusing on the construction of gendered online selfhood. Through the affordances of social media platforms, users expand the range of topics and content accessible to the public, simultaneously exposing these subjects to increased visibility and potential debate. Platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Twitch, X, and Telegram enable anyone to create channels and publicize content on virtually any topic, fostering niche communities. In other words, platforms, driven by their pursuit of attention, time, and data, cannot be analyzed solely through a business or organizational lens. The economic dimension is intertwined with cultural formations—beliefs, values, and identity constructions—which carry an anthropological dimension. In this thematic issue, we are particularly interested in the gendered aspects of this intertwining.

### Keywords

authenticity; digital platforms; entertainment; expertise; gender; selfhood; social media

This thematic issue examines the gendered dimensions of platform economies, focusing on the construction of gendered online selfhood (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). We regard platforms as data infrastructures that capitalize on users’ time, labor, and attention (Poell et al., 2022), with vested commercial interests in disciplining users’ sense of self-perception. Through the affordances of social media platforms, users expand the range of topics and content accessible to the public, simultaneously exposing these subjects to increased visibility and potential debate. Platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Twitch, X, and Telegram enable anyone to create channels and publicize content on virtually any topic, fostering niche communities. From

influencers and “fitfluencers” to life coaches, wellness gurus, sex therapists, and gastronomic bloggers, content creators cultivate “authentic” (Banet-Weiser, 2012) public personas to secure capital, both symbolic and monetary, in response to platform-driven demands for enhanced visibility. Their followers, in turn, learn from these “successful” content producers, who permeate the neoliberal digital marketplace of personalities, on how to discipline—or undiscipline—their gendered self-perceptions, often in ways that are not entirely emancipatory. In other words, platforms, driven by their pursuit of attention, time, and data, cannot be analyzed solely through a business or organizational lens. The economic dimension is intertwined with cultural formations—beliefs, values, and identity constructions—which, as we later discuss, carry an anthropological dimension. In this thematic issue, we are particularly interested in the gendered aspects of this intertwining.

According to a widespread idea in media studies, social networks can be potential agents of political and civic participation, enabling users to organize, exchange information, and protest against injustice through their interactive and creative affordances (e.g., Breuer, 2016; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). This is significant insofar as networked communication, as mentioned earlier, allows for an ever-increasing range of topics to be publicized—importantly, without a classic top-down mediation of gatekeepers or editors, as was the case with mass media. In this thematic issue, Babette Lagrange’s (2025) article, “Emotions on Social Media as Catalysts for Change: Epistemic and Motivational Potentialities for Gender Equality,” argues that marginalized people—particularly those with excluded gender identities—can use social media to form collective protests against forms of (epistemic) injustice. For Lagrange, emotions coming from excluded gender identities constitute a form of epistemic counter-knowledge capable of mobilizing justice-oriented demands in public spaces. In addition, beyond political participation, social media can also be mobilized as part of the simple desire to live a better life. Drawing on feminist reception studies, Eujong Kim and Yeran Kim (2025), in their article “‘Finally, Me Time!’: Korean Middle-Aged Women’s Platform Practices,” argue for a shift in focus from the typical figure of the tech-savvy youth to a rather underrepresented age group in platform literature, referred to as “later middle-age” women. Using Hartmut Rosa’s concept of “resonance” and a mixed-methods analysis, the authors argue that later middle-aged Korean women, who are YouTube users, strive to create a “better life” within the context of wider patriarchal structures in Korea.

Additionally, the rise of gigantic privately owned digital platforms as major sites for controlling the informational and communicational landscape raises questions about the civic or empowering role of social networks. A widely discussed and politicized point of contestation regarding digital platforms is the spread of misinformation and fake news threatening critical thinking and informed social action on a global scale. Beyond misinformation and fake news, however, the platform-driven pursuit of users’ attention and time also has a broader anthropological dimension: it is “modifying and commodifying” the behavior of audiences, users, creators, and human beings in general (Zuboff, 2019, p. 85). Driven by an incessant appetite for extracting user data, digital platforms generate a globalizing demand for daily content, often mirroring industrial production. Content producers—especially those seeking to monetize their content economically or symbolically—operate within the framework of what we might call the “content industry,” a paradigm characterized by the serialized production of content to maintain algorithmic visibility and connectivity. The most popular content producers on media platforms may create content that validates normative gender ideas (insofar as these appeal to wider audiences) or co-opts progressive gender ideals to craft their personas.

This is argued by many in this thematic issue. In the article “Gender Rhetoric for Sale: Ferragni and the Platformization of the Female Body That Crushes Ideologies,” Elisabetta Risi and Maria Angela Polesana (2025) argue that the drive for visibility and audience attention often commodifies feminist ideas, selling them as products. Focusing on the social media activity of Italian influencer Chiara Ferragni—who has nearly 30 million followers on Instagram and 6.5 million on TikTok—the authors argue that the influencer imposes a “simulacrum of perfection” on women, where the narrative of female empowerment aligns with market demands to produce relevant content.

Similarly, in the article “Father Influencers’ Short Videos in China: Representations of Hybrid Fatherhood and Commercialisation on Xiaohongshu,” Min Xu, Xinchun Liu, and Hao Zhang (2025) explore the commodification of “progressive” gender roles, particularly the commercialization of fatherhood representations in dad vlogs and short videos on the Chinese-language platform Xiaohongshu. Using a netnographic approach, the authors argue that representations of fatherhood in Xiaohongshu contrast with the more common authoritarian father role in China. Instead, they portray a “hybrid masculinity” characterized by humor, playfulness, emotional involvement in children’s education, and the frequent sharing of parenting tips and everyday family life experiences. In turn, this caring and hybrid masculinity functions as symbolic capital that fathers can exchange online and potentially monetize on the platform.

The inclusion of animals can also fuel projections of progressive, “feel-good” identity performances while contributing to a broader discourse on well-being. In the article titled “Gendered Zootopia on Instagram: Curation of Pet Accounts and Identity Representation,” Natalia Vereshchagina and Irina Dushakova (2025) examine gender representations on Instagram pet accounts, focusing on how human–animal identities are performed within the specific affordances and limitations of the platform. Similarly to other articles in this thematic issue, the authors argue that rather than challenging or bypassing gender stereotypes—as might be expected given that Instagram imposes fewer regulations on animal content than on human content—pet accounts reinforce traditional gender roles and identities primarily because of the commercial nature of the platform.

Influencers, bloggers, and pet-account owners construct personas that embody some form of niche, or expertise, as mentioned earlier, an informed discourse about a subject that they can potentially offer to audiences. The global massification, commodification, and potential celebrityization of expert knowledge began with the proliferation of television talent shows—including song, fashion, and cooking contests—that introduced the public to the creative celebrity-expert as an arbiter of good taste. Today, potentially anyone can become a micro-expert in any field by attending seminars, reading how-to guides, watching videos, and participating in forum discussions. This expertise is diffused across various spaces, including influencer profiles and hashtags, which not only represent but fragment expertise into countless, and often conflicting, narratives of authenticity, where authority, credibility, and self-presentation are shaped by cultural expectations. This digital turn in access to expert knowledge reinforces the responsibility of individual users for self-care and well-being.

In the article “Instagram and #Wellness: Uncovering Gender and Body Patterns,” Ana Marta M. Flores and Rita Sepúlveda (2025) analyze discourses around so-called “wellness,” a hashtag where vast amounts of micro-expert knowledge are performed daily on social media. By examining 300 public Instagram posts tagged with #wellness, Flores and Sepúlveda explore the portrayal of wellness from a gender perspective,

arguing that wellness content largely reinforces traditional gender and body norms. Similarly to the case of Chiara Ferragni discussed earlier, this content often promotes thin or athletic bodies and depicts gender in binary terms. An important point the authors make is that while counter-narratives exist on Instagram, even within the wellness movement, they struggle to gain visibility because algorithms favor content that aligns with dominant societal norms.

Vanessa Brown and Steve Jones (2025) discuss the emergence of similar gender normativities in the article, “360 Degrees of Feminine Competence: Surface Aesthetics, Expertise, and Authority Among Drip Cake Baker-Influencers,” focusing on so-called “baker-influencers.” The “drip cake,” which Brown and Jones examine, is a mainstream online baking trend emphasizing formal “perfection” rather than the pleasures of eating or feeding. It combines exclusive baking expertise with modernist design, symbolizing a performance of cool, post-feminist, and aspiring middle-class perfection. The cake’s labor-intensive, controlled surface celebrates rationality, cleanliness, and distinction, reflecting the aesthetic labor demanded of women in a post-feminist, neoliberal society.

While such aspirational (and typically unpaid) labor on digital platforms is often performed by women (Duffy, 2017), platform affordances also popularize specific gender-coded labor practices, including in the sphere of intimacy. In “Mediating the Sugar Baby Imaginary: Popular Narratives About Gender and Sexuality in Sugar Dating,” Megan Sawey (2025) explores “sugar dating,” a form of relationship typically involving the exchange of intimacy for economic rewards, as a labor practice. Digital platforms and networked communications make it easier to engage in sugar dating, circulating advice and popularizing the “sugar” imaginary through hashtags like #sugarbaby on TikTok or websites like Seeking. Drawing on interviews with 13 women engaging in such relationships, Sawey shows how they push back against mainstream social media narratives vis-à-vis sugar dating, such as the “hot younger woman” and “sex worker,” emphasizing a more nuanced perspective on their experiences, involving both labor and leisure.

In turn, Christine Linke and Lisa Brune (2025), in “Intimate Yet Exploitative: Representations of Gender-Based Violence in Platformed True Crime Narratives,” show how the demands of platform algorithms not only produce stereotypical representations but can also spectacularize gender-based violence. Through an analysis of Bailey Sarian’s *Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday* series on YouTube, they demonstrate how prioritizing engagement metrics leads to content that decontextualizes and sensationalizes violence, particularly violence against women. To maintain visibility on platforms like YouTube, content creators must adhere to strict posting schedules, often resulting in rushed or sensationalist content.

Overall, the articles in this thematic issue grapple with the gendered aspects of platform economies through various case studies that span diverse geographical contexts, ranging from China and Korea to Italy and the US, mobilizing diverse methodological and theoretical approaches. These case studies examine the multiple ways in which gendered selfhood is constructed in online spaces. While some findings are more optimistic regarding the potential for empowerment, all cases consistently highlight the pervasive influence of neoliberalism in shaping online identities and the currency of this particular content. They foreground the gendered cultures surrounding these economies, illustrating how the entertainment-driven nature of online worlds generates new forms of self-presentation that claim authenticity amidst the constant interchangeabilities of empowerment and alienation, labor and leisure, and normativity and protest.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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