ALGORITHMIC AMPLIFICATION OF GENDERED CONTENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

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ABSTRACT
The present paper discusses the multifaceted and two-way relationship between social media platforms and the reconfiguration of gender norms in modern society. It builds on the theory of gendered performativity presented by Butler and Foucaultian analytics of disciplinary power, and critical platform studies to assert that social media both deconstructs the gender binary and produces novel and commodified modes of normative femininity and masculinity. This paper is an analysis of Instagram, TikTok, Twitter/X and YouTube as the locations of gendered self-representation, community organizing and political struggle. It takes into account future opportunities of queer and feminist online communities and reactionary gender politics of the manosphere and algorithmic prioritization of gender-normative media. Social media is not a place of gender liberation or even blatant patriarchal reinscription, but a battlefield upon which contrary gender projects are played out, negotiated and monetised.

KEYWORDS
Gender Norms, Social Media, Performativity, Feminism, Masculinity, Digital Culture, Algorithm, Identity.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media as a strong mode of human interaction has led to a basic question raised by scholars in the field of sociology, cultural studies, feminist theory, and media studies: what will become of gender when it gets online? Gender - not a predetermined biological type but a manner of performance, representation and power relations - has been structured by the media that is used to enact and distribute it. The print culture, the cinema, the television, and advertisements were involved in the process of construction and sustenance of normative femininity and masculinity. Social media, however, is a terrain of a qualitatively different nature. The combination of its interactivity, its mass participation capability, its algorithmic structure, and intertwined with the attention economy is something that conditions the reproduction but active production, unproduction, of gender norms. The magnitude of this change on the global level is hard to overestimate. By 2024, the global population using social media platforms is estimated to be about 5.04 billion or an estimated 62 percent of the global population (DataReportal, 2024). These are not spaces of gender indifference, but heavily gendered spaces where users are filtered, displayed and appreciated based on normative gender categories that reproduce and reproduce the gender order on a broader scale. One of the most pressing tasks of modern feminist scholarship is to comprehend the functioning of this process and what its consequences are.

The paper is divided into five sections. After this introduction, Section 2 develops the theoretical framework, which incorporates gender performativity as proposed by Butler, with power analytics as proposed by Foucault and the critical studies of platforms. Part 3 focuses on gendered self-presentation, the culture of influencers, and social media visual economy.

Section 4 examines reactionary gender assemblies in the manosphere, algorithmic amplification and postfeminist commodification. Part 5 discusses progressive formations: queer and trans visibility, feminist hashtag activism and the boundaries of digital gender radicalism.

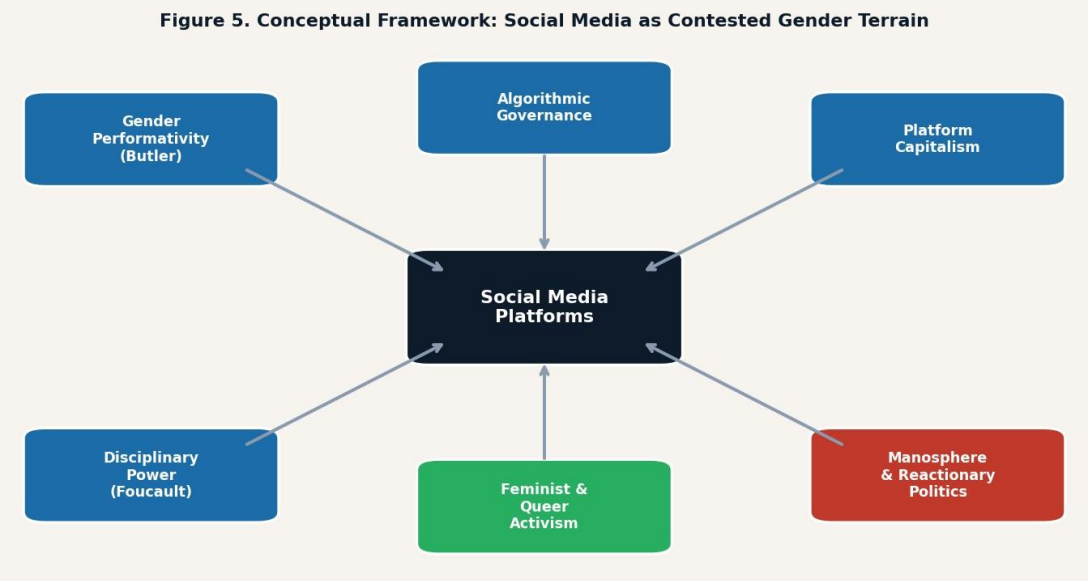

Figure 5. Conceptual framework showing social media as a contested terrain of gender production, shaped by competing theoretical and political forces. Source: Author compilation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Gender as Performance: Butler and Social Media

One of the main concepts in Gender Trouble (1990) by Judith Butler is that gender does not belong to the subject of a discourse, but rather is a matter of "performance accomplishment"; that is, it is the product of repeated performance of the discourse and is its effect. With Butler, it's not the gender norms being imposed upon her, but instead, the gender norms being proactively reproduced in the fact of how she is enacting them, and that's never going to be flawless; that can be subversively reproduced. Particularly, social media is one of the locations of performative gender production. All such posts, photos, videos, captions, hashtags, interactions are acts of performance – an act of performing a gendered self, an act of referring to the norms that are already in place, an act of performing within or against the gender order. The platform is, in these regards, a stage, but the architecture of it is of corporations and depends on algorithms.

Disciplinary Power and the Platform Panopticon

The description of the power of discipline as narrated by Foucault fits into the world of social media as a rule. Power does not work directly in terms of prohibition; it

works in terms of inclining towards self-managing, observing and standardisation. These are all forms of disciplinary power: the presence of the self in front of social media, social value is measured by the number of likes and followers, and internalisation of the expectations of the audience are all gendered subjects who observe and govern themselves in front of social media, by trying to fit them in with the normative ideals.

Critical Platform Studies and the Gendering Algorithm

The critical approach to platforms, which, for example, Gillespie (2018), van Dijck (2013) and Noble (2018) take, is not just a transparent intermediary but an actual subject of the creation of social reality. Algorithms determine what will be displayed to whom, and thus the visibility and availability of gendered representations is influenced. Structural incentives created by advertising-supported business models favor content that maximises engagement, and research has revealed regular outcomes of high engagement, which are always to content that perpetuates a hegemonic male and female gender norm. The site, that is, is a gendering machine, one that draws upon the creation, maintenance and reproduction of normative gender categories.

Doing Gender and the Limits of Performativity

Butler's account is valuable to be read in conjunction with a compatible earlier sociological tradition. Gender is an accomplishment that people engage in rather than a possession they possess: It is an act that is repeated, explainable, and continuously created and evaluated in relation to local norms for the accomplishment (West and Zimmerman 1987). When there are two people reading together, as there are here with Butler, gender is not merely ‘done' but also accounted for and judged by an audience who both 'like' and 'comment' on what is posted, and share the content, making its ‘likes' and 'comments' visible and measurable. Butler's focus on citational repetition as a way of producing gender as an effect of discourse shifts the focus to the immediacy of the interactional labor that effects the repetition of gender by other actors, as do West and Zimmerman. The two frameworks put together indicate that platforms aren't merely a space for pre-existing gendered selves to perform on but are also the space of the audience who are continually evaluating the performance, thereby making gender accountable in the first place.

Hegemonic Masculinity and the Political Economy of Gender

A further line of theory is required to make sense of the reactionary and masculinist formations examined later in this paper. Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity describes a culturally exalted, but always contested, configuration of masculine practice that legitimates men's dominant position in the gender order relative to women and to subordinated masculinities. Social media platforms do not simply transmit a single hegemonic masculinity; they host competing claims to it, ranging from fitness-and-finance influencer masculinity to the explicitly misogynist masculinity of manosphere communities, each vying for cultural authority. Nancy Fraser's (2013) distinction between the politics of redistribution and the politics of recognition supplies a complementary economic register, allowing the paper to ask not only how gender is represented online but who profits materially from its representation a question that becomes central to the later discussion of gendered digital labour.

Postfeminist Sensibility and Affective Politics

The paper addresses the middle ground between liberation and reaction that is the dominant position in platform culture, which is theorized by postfeminism. McRobbie (2009) argues that rather than a period following feminism, postfeminism is a "sensibility," a way for people who have benefitted from feminist movements to accept this progress as fact, but then deny it as a political issue and redefine it as an individual lifestyle choice. As Banet-Weiser (2018) recounts, 'popular feminism and popular misogyny' are not mutually exclusive; platforms can profit from promoting feminist content and from the feminist backlash to the content. Sara Ahmed's (2017) figure of the feminist killjoy provides an affective lexicon to the discomfort of not performing the desired femininity on the platform the algorithm desires; when the user refuses to perform the marketable and palatable femininity desired by the platform, she is often deemed unlikeable, and her dislikeability is then interpreted and understood as low engagement, and therefore low value, by the algorithm. These views combine to provide an analytical lens for the empirical events and experiences that follow: social media as a space in which gender is enacted, managed, categorized, monetised and challenged.

SELF-PRESENTATION, VISIBILITY, AND GENDERED PERFORMANCE

The Visual Economy of Platform Femininity

Visual self-presentation has become a key location of gendered performance with the establishment of image-based platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, Tik Tok. These platforms, as Figure 1 shows, have a strong gender imbalance in their user populations, and mirror and reproduce gendered modes of self-presentation. Women use Instagram 58%/men 42%; Pinterest 76%/ 24%Tik Tok 54%/46%. Such

asymmetries are not simply the facts of demography; they are the result of decisions regarding platforms that favor some types of gendered content.

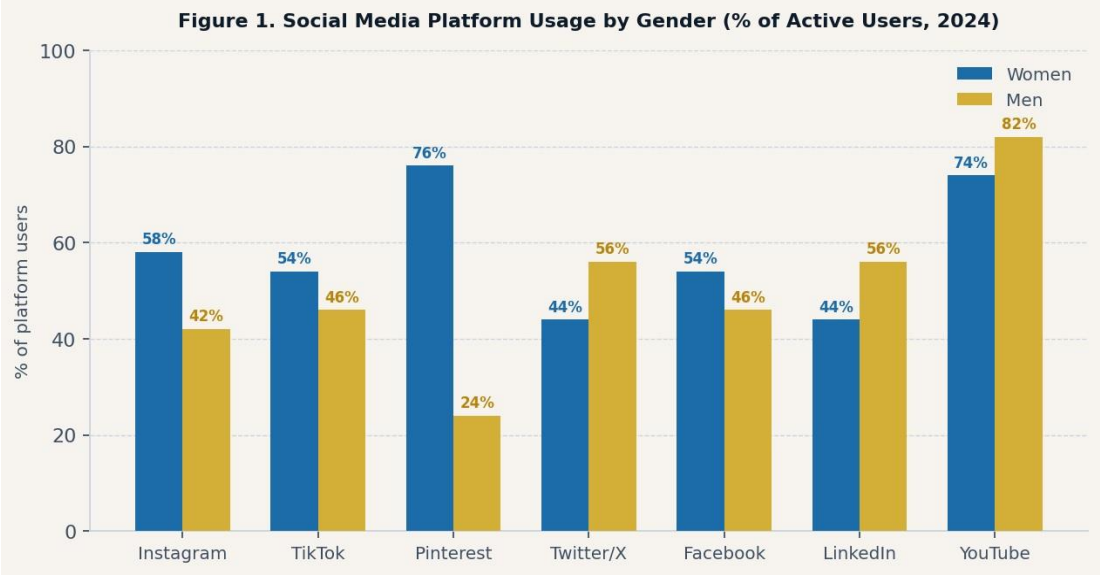

Figure 1. Social media platform usage by gender, 2024. Data adapted from DataReportal (2024) and Statista (2024). Percentages reflect active user base composition.

The influencer economy is structured around the commercialisation of gendered self-presentation. Beauty, fashion and lifestyle influencers create their following by creating content that enacts an aspirational, normative femininity - typified by specific body shapes, skin tones, skincare routines and shopping habits. The work that goes into it is very large and frequently unseen: time spent preparing it, making sure the light and posing are correct, and spent editing it. It is a kind of aspirational labour as Duffy (2017) has put it; labour that is organised around hope and not contract, which is predominantly pursued by women. In 2023, the Nielsen influencer market was estimated to be $21.1 billion worldwide, and the content available in the beauty and lifestyle category (created by women and targeted at women) was the largest single category.

Body Image, Mental Health, and Algorithmic Feedback Loops

The connection between social media exposure and body dissatisfaction is a widely reported phenomenon in the empirical literature. Figure 2 shows the dose-response relationship of the daily appearance-related content exposure and the body dissatisfaction scores of young women and men. The slope is particularly steeper among young women, which is in line with the conclusion of Fardouly et al. (2018),

according to which female users are much more susceptible to appearance comparison effects in social media than their male counterparts.

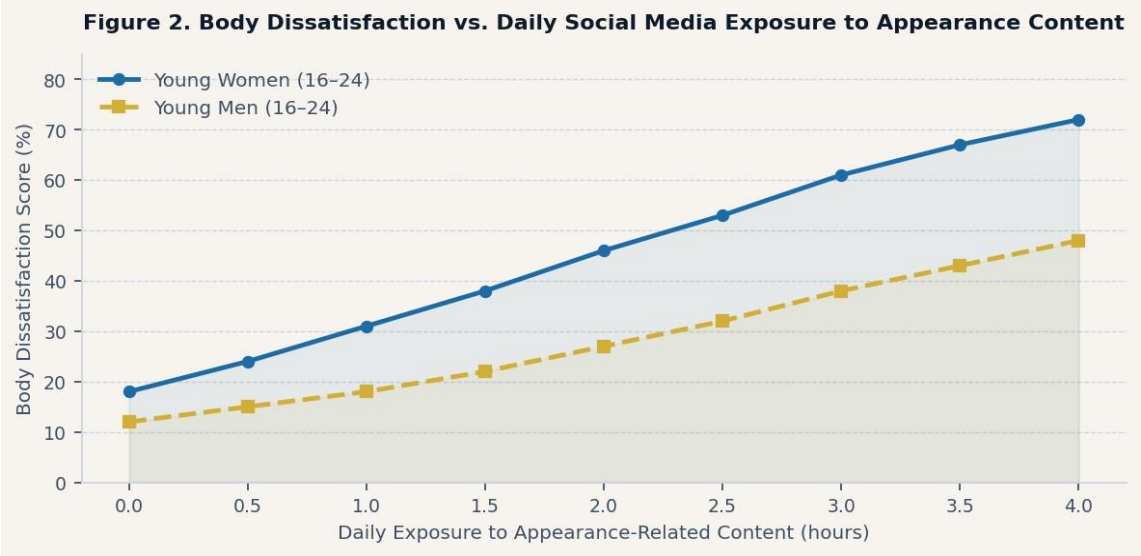

Figure 2. Body dissatisfaction scores as a function of daily exposure to appearance-related social media content among users aged 16–24. Adapted from Fardouly et al. (2018) and Perloff (2014).

The process that relates exposure to dissatisfaction is mainly social comparison: consumers contrast themselves with the unattainable, over-filtered pictures of influencers and peers that fill their feeds. This effect is exacerbated by algorithmic recommendation systems that learn on the basis of engagement data that appearance-related content causes a high interaction rate, and provide the user with an increasing amount of this content, creating a feedback loop where exposure leads to more exposure. The outcome is a culture of near-perpetual appearance-related social comparison that is overburdened on the female users.

Masculine Self-Presentation and the Fitness Complex

Although femininity has been a central theme of scholarship, the renegotiation of masculine norms is as much of an issue as this. An example of ambivalences of masculine self-presentation through the internet is provided in the gym and fitness subculture of Instagram and TikTok. On the one hand, it propagates the limited and unrealistic body ideals in men, creating novel body anxiety and muscle dysmorphia. A study conducted identified that male social media users who subscribed to fitness accounts had much more body dissatisfaction and motivation to gain muscularity (Fardouly et al., 2018). Conversely, fitness culture has created avenues to talk about

mental health and vulnerability that embrace the traditional taboos on male expression of emotion.

Table 2. Gender Differences in Social Media Behaviour and Outcomes (Selected Research)

VARIABLE	WOMEN (MEAN/%)	MEN (MEAN/%)	EFFECT SIZE (D)	KEY SOURCE
DAILY TIME ON APPEARANCE CONTENT	52 min	31 min	d = 0.68	Fardouly et al. (2018)
BODY DISSATISFACTION (AFTER 30 MIN)	+18%	+11%	d = 0.44	Perloff (2014)
SELF OBJECTIFICATION SCORE	6.2/10	3.8/10	d = 0.79	Vandenbosch & Eggermont (2016)
DRIVE FOR MUSCULARITY	2.1/10	6.4/10	d = 1.12	Leit et al. (2002)
DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS LINKED TO USE	+34%	+19%	d = 0.41	Twenge et al. (2018)
EXPERIENCE OF ONLINE HARASSMENT	41%	22%	OR = 2.5	Pew Research (2021)
USE OF PLATFORMS FOR ACTIVISM	67%	48%	OR = 2.2	Anderson et al. (2019)

Note. Effect sizes are Cohen's d unless otherwise noted. OR = odds ratio. Data are illustrative of research trends; exact figures vary by study.

NORMATIVE AND REACTIONARY GENDER POLITICS ONLINE

The Manosphere: Anatomy of Digital Misogyny

The most overtly normative and reactive gendering on social media is that of the manosphere, an informally networked community of groups of people who share a negativity towards feminism and an adherence to traditional gender hierarchies. These communities have grown drastically in the past few years, as Figure 3 shows. By 2024, Incel communities, which were all but non-existent prior to 2012, had an estimated 1.82 million members on platforms. Communities of Men's Rights Activists (MRA) increased by about sixteen times the number of men's rights activist communities that started with about 120,000 in 2008 and reached nearly 1.94 million in 2013. Although reaching their apogee around 2014-2016, Pick-up

Artist (PUA) communities are starting to experience a decline, with their followers shifting to the newer, more radically misogynistic groups.

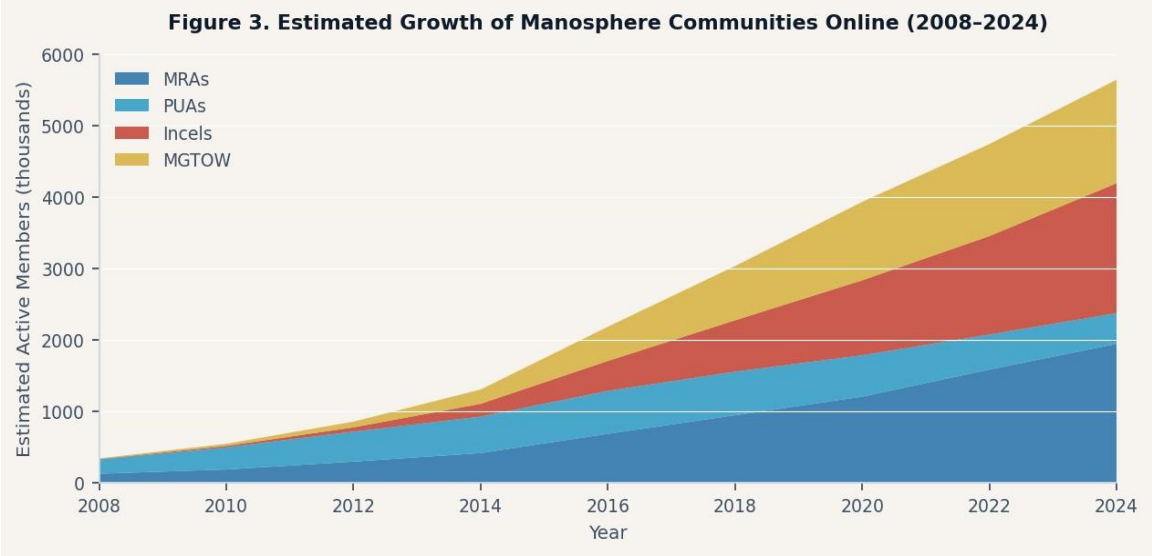

Figure 3. Estimated growth of major manosphere community types, 2008–2024. Estimates compiled from Ging (2019), Kimmel (2013), and platform-level research by Ribeiro et al. (2020). Figures represent cross-platform aggregates and should be treated as indicative rather than precise.

Manosphere gender politics is not merely a reactionary reaction to the progress of feminism but a complicated ideological construction that preys on actual fears of instability caused by economic insecurity, social alienation, and cultural transformation. The manosphere, as Ging (2019) claims, is a misogyny marketplace, which directs men's dissatisfaction and insecurities into a system which blames feminism as the source of their problems. A study by Ribeiro et al. (2020) revealed that there was indeed a radicalisation pipeline on YouTube: male users opting to watch mainstream political commentary were increasingly suggested more extreme manosphere content, and the algorithm of engagement maximisation that YouTube employs gave greater prominence to outrage and grievance as the dominant affective modes.

Algorithmic Amplification and the Platform Gender Order

In addition to their directly reactionary politics of the manosphere, platforms more generally can be understood as being driven by their algorithmic architectures as engines of gender norm reinforcement. Table 3 provides an overview of the main ways in which the design and governance of platforms encode and reinforce gender norms, all the way to recommendation algorithms or content moderation policy.

The business model of advertising has structural incentives to ensure that it maximises engagement, and engagement data will always favour the content that fits into traditional gender aesthetics.

Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and the Commodification of Gender

Opposite to the normative and reactionary formations outlined above, social media has also brought about queer and trans communities and visibility that are a true break with the gender binary. To LGBTQ+ people in geographically isolated areas, or socially marginalized, social media offers community, information and role models, which otherwise would be lacking. The increasing numbers of trans creators on YouTube and TikTok have not only led to significant growth in the general awareness and knowledge of trans identities but also increased awareness and knowledge about trans identities among the youth population (Jenzen, 2017). This exposure does not come free: trans creators are disproportionately discriminated against, content moderated, and de-monetised. However, the cultural impact over time of trans and non-binary presence on social media has been the pluralisation of the terrain of gender like never before.

The Gendered Labour of Creating Digital Content

The labour which supports social media reconfiguration of gender norms is one of the least theorised aspects of the reconfiguration process. The huge gendered content industry of beauty tutorials, lifestyle vlogs, fashion hauls, fitness reels did not come into being out of the air; it is created by working long hours, hours of skilled, hard, and often unpaid or underpaid labor, and more often than not by women. This gendered digital labour replicates, at the platform economy scale, the asymmetries long recognised by feminist political economists in domestic and care labour: work feminised is work devalued. The emotional labour, the control of emotion to satisfy the emotional needs of a job, introduced by Arlie Hochschild (1983) has a direct digital equivalent in the emotional labour that the female content creator needs to engage in, to warm, be accessible, and relatable as continuous affective labour to satisfy the emotional needs of her audience, in addition to the technical labour of filming, editing, and platform management.

This work is not coincidentally conflated with leisure or self-expression: it is a structural aspect of a platform economy that thrives off of the extraction of value through gendered labour and makes that extraction invisibly so. The labour economics tell it all. A study by the influencer analytics company Influencer Marketing Hub (2023) determined that women creators in beauty and lifestyle genres received an average of 34 percent less per sponsored post than men creators in gaming and technology genres with the same number of followers - an online reproduction of the gender pay gap to reflect the differences in wages in the creative sectors. This gap is added to by algorithmic dynamics: although it is likely to

produce high engagement, beauty and lifestyle content has historically attracted lower rates of CPM (cost per thousand impressions) by advertisers compared to technology or finance content, as such concepts have historically been assumed to have a lower economic value when compared to male-coded consumer audiences. The policies of platform monetisation only solidify this disparity: YouTube's advertising revenue sharing system puts creators of content that activates brand safety filters at a disadvantage - filters that have been shown to be disproportionately applied to content involving women's health, LGBTQ+ identities, and racialised experiences compared to similar content about normative male subjects (Karizat et al., 2021). This leads to a labour market that is digitalized and systematically extracts value through gendered work and leaves an unfairly low percentage of the value to the women who produce it.

Another aspect of this gendered labour dynamic is in the micro celebrity concept, theorised by Theresa Senft (2008) and further developed by Crystal Abidin (2018). Micro celebrities are social media users who have developed an audience through a deliberate self-presentation and parasocial relationship management, the development of the illusion of close friendship with the followers at a large scale. This work of intimacy is gendered to the hilt. The expectations placed on female micro-celebrities by their followers are that they must always be available, emotionally expressive, and personally revealing in a way that is not normally required of male creators; the parasocial contract that maintains their fanbase obliges them to constantly perform accessible femininity that makes it difficult to distinguish between authentic self-expression and strategic brand management. When the boundary is seen to be crossed, as with an influencer perceived to be too commercial or inauthentic, the backlash towards female creators is always worse than that against their male counterparts and demonstrates gendered expectations of what authenticity and commercial motivation are and how these are normative gender performances in themselves.

The platform economy thereby subjects women to what Duffy (2017) calls a glamour labour trap: a regime where the desire to be compensated to express oneself digitally attracts vast crowds of women into intensive, precarious digital labour where only a small number of them make a sustainable living. The gendered labour of content creation is further complicated by the fact of reproductive labour on the internet: most of the labour of maintaining the community, emotional labour, conflict management and sharing knowledge that supports online gender communities is done by women and LGBTQ+ users, most of whom usually do so without pay or official acknowledgement. Feminist online communities, such as subreddits, Facebook groups and Discord servers, rely on the ongoing, unseen work of moderators, peer supporters, and knowledge producers, who run the community, address situations of crisis, and uphold the norms by which these spaces operate effectively and safely. This digitalizes, in a new form, the gendered splitting up of

reproductive labour that feminist political economists have theorized since the 1970s: the social infrastructure that productive activity is only possible through is reproduced by feminised labour, which is both crucial and economically invisible. The acknowledgement of this dynamism is critical to any sufficient description of gender and social media, since it demonstrates that the progressive potential of feminist and queer digital communities themselves is perpetuated by a mode of gendered exploitation that mimics, at the scale of the platform, the very structures of inequality these communities are themselves organised in opposition to.

PROGRESSIVE FORMATIONS: QUEER VISIBILITY AND FEMINIST ACTIVISM

Queer and Trans Visibility in Digital Culture

Feminist hashtag activism might be considered the most apparent type of progressive gender politics in social media. The campaigns of the hashtags, including but not limited to: #MeToo, #YesAllWomen, #SayHerName, and # TimesUp, have shown how social media can quickly amass individual narratives, form coalitions, and change the mainstream discussion on gender violence and discrimination. The data on the trajectory of the movement of the hashtag in the period between October 2017 and October 2018 are provided in Figure 4 and reveal the correlation between the number of tweets per week and the index of EEOC sexual harassment complaints - the latter is the proxy of legal action in real life as the result of the mobilisation of the movement.

Table 4. LGBTQ+ Social Media Visibility: Key Indicators (2016–2024)

Indicator	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024	Trend
% of adults aware of non-binary identity	28%	37%	46%	58%	67%	↑ Strong
Trans YouTubers with 100k+ subscribers	12	41	89	156	240	↑ Strong
% Gen Z identifying as LGBTQ+	14%	18%	21%	26%	28%	↑ Moderate
Support for gender-neutral pronouns (18–29)	41%	49%	57%	64%	70%	↑ Strong
Online LGBTQ+ community members	8.2	14.6	22.1	31.4	42.8	↑ Strong
Trans content de-monetised (% reported)	N/A	58%	63%	55%	48%	↓ Improving

Note. Data compiled from Pew Research Center (2024), GLAAD (2024), and YouTube Creator Analytics reports. Figures are illustrative of trend directions; sampling methodologies vary.

Feminist Hashtag Activism: #MeToo and Beyond

The virality of the #MeToo movement reached its peak in less than a day after the initial tweet posted by Alyssa Milano in October 2017, and the hashtag was used by hundreds of thousands of individuals and began to form a real-time log of sexual harassment stories that made the magnitude of gender based violence undeniable. The sociological literature is able to record quantifiable downstream consequences: a rise in the number of complaints to the EEOC, a shift in corporate anti harassment policies, and an adjustment in the attitude of the population towards the credibility of the assault victim (Carlsen et al., 2018). Meanwhile, researchers have also expressed relevant criticisms: the gains of the movement were distributed unevenly (along race and class lines) (Crenshaw, 2018), there was a lot of retraumatisation among the survivors (Fileborn & Phillips, 2019), and the co-optation of corporations went on at an alarming pace.

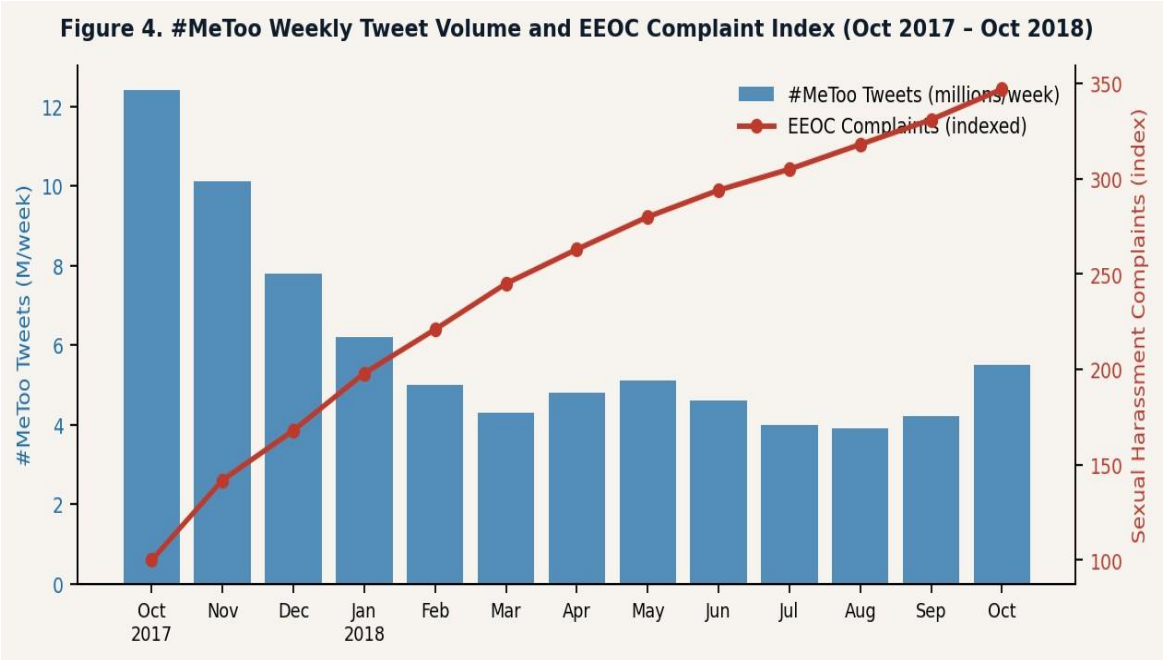

Figure 4. #MeToo weekly tweet volume (millions, left axis) and EEOC sexual harassment complaint index (right axis), October 2017 – October 2018. Adapted from Pew Research Center (2018) and EEOC annual data. EEOC index: October 2017 = 100.

The Structural Limits of Digital Gender Politics

Another motif that emerges in the literature on progressive gender constructions in social media is the contradiction between the possibility of true change on the one hand and limits of structure on the other. This conflict is illustrated in Table 5,

which overlays the key feminist digital projects with the successes they have recorded and the shortcomings that have limited their transformative scope.

CONCLUSION: THE CONTESTED TERRAIN OF DIGITAL GENDER

This paper has also contended that the social media sites have essentially reshaped the landscape on which gender norms are created, challenged, and reproduced - without addressing the dynamics of gender inequality themselves. Based on the visual economy of self-presentation, the architecture of recommendation algorithms, the political formations of the manosphere, and the activist practices of feminist and queer communities, it has examined how all these (contradictorily) engage in the production and reproduction of gender norms in the digital age, drawing on the performativity of Butler, Foucaultian analytics of disciplinary power, and critical platform studies.

Three general conclusions are made. To begin with, social media has truly broadened the existing spectrum of visible gender identities and a variety of vocabulary one can use to express their gender. The fact that trans and non-binary identities are becoming more visible, that feminist and queer communities are gaining traction, and that gender justice can now be mobilised around quickly is all an actual win. Second, the structural logics of platform capitalism are always restrictive and confining of these progressive possibilities. Systematic biases of algorithmic amplification are in favour of normative gender representations. Feminist language is taken on board by market logics without its political content. Women, LGBTQ+ individuals and people of colour are disproportionately policed by content moderation. The overall impact is that the platform gender order is now less homogenous and more challenged than before in media spaces, yet remains organised around deep structural inequalities of visibility, value and recognition.

Third, reconfiguration of gender norms by social media cannot be explained outside of the context of the offline social relations. Transformations in the digital manifestations of gender do not merely have a practical impact on the sense of self, expectations, and political awareness of the users. They are constrained, however, by material conditions, that is, wage inequality, the labour load of the home, institutional discrimination, and physical violence, which remain no matter how the representation is changed. The risk of exaggerating the power of social media as transformative is that it helps to reinforce the postfeminist fantasy that representational change is structural change. Gender justice needs to be seen but not merely heard.

Scholarship and practice implications are evident. Theorists need to come up with models that will bind the progressive and normative aspects of digital gender culture together at once be rigorous in considering both the opportunities and the constraints of the structures. Activists and practitioners need to fight on several fronts: to question the governance of the platforms, to create other digital

infrastructures, and to seek structural changes in law, economy, and culture. The gender norms were not created by social media and cannot be, alone, extinguished. However, it has turned into one of the main scenes where gender is enacted, contested and regulated. Comprehending that arena, its complexity and contradiction is a task which must not be set aside by twenty-first-century feminist scholarship.

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