



Gendered Fetishism and Emotional Capitalism in Digital Culture: Commodity, Care, and Control

Nissya Febrizani

Department of History of Islamic Civilization, Faculty of Adab and Humanities, Universitas Islam Negeri
Imam Bonjol, Padang, Indonesia

nissyafebrizani@uinib.ac.id

Abstract

The contemporary digital era marks a fundamental shift in the relationships between gender, affect, and economy. This study explores how emotional labor and gender identity are commodified within platform capitalism, focusing on the practices of female creators on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Using digital ethnography and multimodal semiotic analysis, the study identifies three interrelated patterns. First, the monetization of vulnerability, where personal narratives—such as experiences with mental health or body image—are strategically leveraged to generate economic gains through sponsorships, affiliate links, and donation models. Second, the ritualization of care, which positions repetitive practices such as self-care routines as branding strategies, creating engineered intimacy and an aura of authenticity to maintain audience engagement. Third, algorithmic control, where platform infrastructures amplify affective content and shape creator behavior in alignment with attention-driven economic logic. These dynamics converge in what this study terms *affective fetishism*: the transformation of care, vulnerability, and authenticity into aestheticized commodities that appear natural but are systematically optimized for visibility and profitability. The digital performance of femininity is no longer mere self-expression; it is a curated product guided by algorithmic governance. This research contributes to discussions on emotional capitalism by demonstrating how gendered affect circulates as both symbolic and economic capital in digital culture. The findings highlight the ambivalent space between empowerment and exploitation, revealing how authenticity is not only a cultural value but also a commodified asset engineered for engagement in algorithmically mediated public spaces.

Keywords: gender, digital culture, language, commodification, emotional capitalism, semiotics

INTRODUCTION

digital era has transformed how gender identity is understood, expressed, and commodified. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have evolved beyond communication tools into affective economies—ecosystems where attention, emotion, and connection are produced and exchanged as value (Van Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2018; Banet-Weiser, 2018). In this ecosystem, personal expressions such as care, empathy, and vulnerability are no longer spontaneous; they are designed

performatively to boost visibility and generate economic returns (Duffy, 2017; Abidin, 2018).

This phenomenon is enabled by affective technologies—digital infrastructures that not only facilitate emotional expression but also measure, manage, and monetize user engagement (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013). Platform algorithms act as affective curators, determining which content gains visibility, who receives attention, and how social and economic value is distributed. In other words, algorithms are not neutral tools; they are power devices shaping gender performance to align with platform capitalist logics (Massumi, 2002; Clough, 2007).

In this context, language, visuals, and digital practices function as complex semiotic systems. Signs—including captions, hashtags, visual filters, color choices, and aesthetic styles—do more than convey information; they construct self-image, manage audience emotions, and embed values within digital power relations (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). For instance, hashtags like #selflove or #healing are not merely descriptive; they establish associations with authenticity, self-care, and empowerment, which are then marketed as identity.

Moreover, expression is performative. Drawing from Austin (1962) and Butler (1990), a caption like “I am learning to love myself” is not just a statement—it performs the identity it represents. Repeated performativity creates the illusion of stable gender, making femininity appear natural, although it is socially engineered. Yet, digital spaces allow for performative failures, such as audience rejection, criticism, or reappropriation, offering avenues for resistance even within emotional capitalist frameworks. Gender fetishism and emotional capitalism emerge as cultural and economic processes that normalize femininity as commodity.

Digital popular culture plays a key role in legitimizing and normalizing commodified gender narratives. Legitimacy here refers to the perception of certain values—such as associating femininity with softness, care, and aesthetics—as natural and unquestioned. This naturalization occurs when social constructions (e.g., women as inherently caring and empathetic) are presented as innate rather than culturally produced. Entertainment, lifestyle blogging, and influencer culture serve as ideological

instruments, subtly enforcing gender norms compatible with market logics. Audiences may feel empowered in their choices—following self-care trends, for example—while these practices are shaped by market norms and platform algorithms. Algorithms amplify this effect by prioritizing content aligned with dominant gender norms, marginalizing alternative expressions, and reinforcing representations that benefit emotional capitalism.

As Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) note via “spreadable media,” digital content spreads not merely through intrinsic quality but through resonance with dominant values and power structures. Content emphasizing aesthetic femininity, self-care, and emotional vulnerability is more likely to go viral, aligning with commodification logics supporting beauty, wellness, and lifestyle industries. Language and visuals thus perform actively, constructing gender realities that appear authentic while being economically calculated.

This represents a paradigm shift from understanding gender as a relatively fixed social category to conceiving it as fluid, strategic digital performance directly tied to platform economies. Gender identity is no longer solely “who we are socially” but also an action curated and monetized in digital spaces. Semiotic analysis of social media gender representations reveals how visual, linguistic, and symbolic elements collectively convey meaning. Barthes (1972) distinguishes denotative (literal) and connotative (implied) layers in cultural signs, allowing digital content to present gender as “natural” despite strategic construction.

Platform architecture—the technical structure and algorithms that determine content visibility—reinforces this process. Instagram and TikTok prioritize visually appealing, potentially viral content, making posts highlighting emotions, care, or feminine aesthetics more prominent. Yet digital spaces also allow resistance and subversion: creators can use similar feminine codes or narratives to critique stereotypes or present alternative gender identities. De Certeau’s (1984) concept of “tactical media” illustrates how users leverage platform infrastructures—hashtags, visual codes, editing tools—to reinterpret content without breaking the system.

Feminine attributes such as softness, care, and emotional vulnerability

undergo fetishization, transforming into symbolic assets with economic value in the attention economy. Female creators sharing self-care routines or emotional experiences can attract sponsorships, donations, and high engagement, converting vulnerability into digital commodities. Masculine representations—emphasizing leadership, physicality, or “tough” humor—are similarly commodified. Both poles of gender are strategically constructed in line with emotional capitalist logics, echoing Marx’s commodity fetishism: social relations underlying gender production are obscured, making gender appear as inherent property. Affective economy theories (Ahmed, 2004; Hochschild, 2012) show how emotional labor, whether feminine or masculine, becomes social and economic capital, reinforced through platform algorithms.

Previous research often isolates single dimensions, such as platform political economy (Srnicsek, 2017), gender representation (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015), or affective economy (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010), without integrating them into a comprehensive framework. Yet digital practices by creators are inseparable: gender identity, emotional labor, and platform economic logic interact to create social and economic content value. For example, female creators posting self-care routines, mental health content, or body positivity narratives both express femininity and transform vulnerability into engagement, sponsorships, or donations. Male creators similarly optimize masculine attributes for branding and economic gain.

Most studies on gender and social media focus on Western contexts, leaving gaps in understanding how these dynamics operate in non-Western cultures, including Indonesia. The Indonesian context presents unique social, cultural, and political-economic configurations: more collectivist gender norms, local aesthetics shaping femininity and masculinity, and distinct audience interaction patterns. Indonesian creator monetization strategies reflect both global capitalism and local cultural preferences, trends, and media practices. Addressing this gap is crucial given the global nature of digital platforms and diverse cultural contexts. This study examines the intersection of semiotic, economic, and affective dimensions in digital gender construction, exploring how dominant narratives are sustained while also permitting resistance or subversion. Practically, this research informs critical digital literacy

development, aiding social media users, educators, and policymakers in navigating digital identity complexities, creator monetization strategies, and platform attention logics.

LITERARY REVIEWS

Commodity Fetishism in Commercial Media Studies

The concept of commodity fetishism introduced by Karl Marx in *Capital* remains a foundational framework in critical studies of media and contemporary consumer culture. This idea explains how the social relations underlying commodity production are often obscured, making the value inherent in commodities appear natural and almost magical. In the context of mass industries, the distance between the product and its production process is amplified by capitalist logic, presenting commodities as “natural” entities devoid of visible social relations (Jhally, 1987). Mosco (1996) refers to this as *double mystification*, a process in which advertising and promotional culture not only conceal the origins of production but also add layers of meaning linking products to social aspirations, identity, and cultural value. For instance, beauty products or accessories are represented not merely as functional objects but as status symbols, expressions of love, or prerequisites for social acceptance—values that appear inherent but are, in fact, symbolic constructions (Goldman, 1992; Williams, 1980).

Moreover, commercial media shapes consumer identity through *appellation* (Williamson, 1978), a process in which individuals are invited to identify themselves with lifestyles associated with products. This strategy creates identities that appear autonomous and authentic, but are in reality interpellated by capitalist ideology. In digital contexts, this mechanism is amplified through platform algorithms that determine which content appears, increasing the visibility of particular products or symbols while simultaneously guiding user behavior (Srnicsek, 2017). For example, Nike’s “Just Do It” campaign combines neoliberal values of independence and performativity with aspirational imagery, while concealing exploitative labor conditions behind the production chain (Goldman & Papson, 1998).

This framework of commodity fetishism is particularly relevant for analyzing

gender in digital spaces, where feminine attributes—such as gentleness, care, and emotional sensitivity—can be treated as “commodities” that attract attention, build engagement, and generate economic value. This transformation is often termed *gendered fetishism*, wherein seemingly natural gender performances are calculated and monetized through emotional capitalism (Ahmed, 2004; Hochschild, 2012). In practice, emotional labor—such as displaying care, empathy, or vulnerability—becomes an asset that can be capitalized through sponsorships, donations, or digital content monetization.

At the same time, digital media provides avenues for resistance and reinterpretation. De Certeau’s (1984) concept of tactical media emphasizes that users can leverage platform infrastructures—such as hashtags, visuals, or narratives—to challenge dominant narratives or negotiate their own identities. In other words, although algorithms and platform logic facilitate the commodification of gender, digital spaces still allow for subversion, remixing, and creative reinterpretation that can transform the meaning of gender performance.

The phenomenon of commodity fetishism described by Marx remains relevant in the contemporary digital era, but it has intensified in more complex ways. On social media, platforms function as what Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) call *affective technologies*, systems that allow users’ emotions, attention, and identities to be transformed into commodities for exchange. Unlike traditional advertising, which attributes symbolic value to commodities through association with social imagery, digital economies position identity and affect themselves as objects of commodification. In other words, fetishism now applies not only to material goods but also to emotional experiences, interpersonal relations, and user self-performance. Illouz (2007) terms this phenomenon *emotional capitalism*, where human emotions operate not merely as natural responses but as instruments for generating monetizable economic value.

In practice, social media platforms build *affective infrastructures* that not only facilitate emotional expression but also measure, rank, and extract it as economic resources. Simple interactions—such as likes, shares, comments, emojis, or captions

expressing vulnerability—cease to be merely social communication and become indicators of monetizable emotional performativity. Within this framework, gestures of care and vulnerability transform into performative strategies—or *strategic caring*—where influencers manage their emotions and personal experiences to cultivate engagement, loyalty, and monetization (Duffy, 2017). Expressions that appear authentic are, in reality, calculated and curated according to algorithmic logic and attention economies.

Gendered dimensions undergo similar fetishization, termed *gendered fetishism*. Feminine attributes such as care, gentleness, and emotional sensitivity are packaged as symbolic assets that attract engagement and economic opportunities. Similarly, masculine performances—such as assertiveness, independence, or leadership—also become commoditized, albeit through different narratives and aesthetics. Thus, gender performance on social media is not merely an expression of individual identity but a strategic practice integrated with the logic of affective capitalism. Digital fetishism extends Marx's concept from material objects to experiences, affect, and identity. The separation of gendered/emotional performance from its original social context creates the illusion of free and authentic self-expression, when in fact it is governed by algorithms, visual aesthetics, and discursive practices that normalize the economic value of affective performance.

New Media and the Commodity-Sign

Commodities are no longer merely physical objects with use value or exchange value; they have become social and affective symbols that can be monetized, curated, and extended through digital interactivity. This aligns with Goldman's (1992) argument that in advertising, commodities function as *commodity-signs* carrying *sign value*—values that link products to social reference systems such as class, gender, freedom, or lifestyle. While traditional advertising is limited to specific spaces to build symbolic associations, digital media presents a more flexible and immersive landscape, where the production of signs can be interactive, adaptive, and algorithmically differentiated.

Several trends enhance marketers' ability to construct these commodity-signs.

First, the Internet as a multimodal channel allows the combination of text, images, and video to create rich sign experiences. Second, interactivity combined with data mining and targeted marketing enables commercial messages to be tailored to specific audiences. Third, digital production techniques expand the visual and narrative capacities of commodities. Fourth, the boundary between commercial and non-commercial content becomes blurred, as seen in influencer marketing practices, where product promotion appears as ordinary content (Spurgeon, 2008; Schumann & Thorson, 2007). These trends together form a fluid ecology of signs, where commodities exist not merely as objects of consumption but as semiotic experiences continuously extended and curated.

The Internet offers a new landscape for advertising, where the representation of commodities is no longer confined by time or print space. Through branded websites and Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC), brands can provide interactive experiences combining text, visuals, audio, and video. This format allows consumers to enter a coherent symbolic world of the brand, where products are not only objects of consumption but also parts of broader narratives and experiences. Practices like these mark a shift from traditional advertising toward digital narrative and experience, which Gray (2008) identifies as the future of advertising, where commodities become interactive and immersive commodity-signs. This logic also applies to gender performance on social media. Feminine attributes—such as care, gentleness, or empathy—and masculine attributes—such as assertiveness, independence, or leadership—can be transformed into commodity-signs that attract attention, engagement, and monetization. Therefore, digital media not only facilitates gender representation but also turns gender performance into symbolic and economic assets, optimized by platform algorithms and discursive practices. This phenomenon demonstrates how gender commodification and affective capitalism are intertwined, producing the illusion of authentic self-expression while simultaneously serving the logic of the digital market.

New media does not just expand spaces for attaching signs to commodities but also enables the personalization of signs. Through interactivity, data mining, and

database-driven marketing, each user can be represented as a “data self” (Fernback, 2007)—a digital profile that allows for the creation of highly specific advertisements and content. In this context, commodities are no longer linked to uniform social references but to individual dreams, preferences, and desires, which are measured, mapped, and processed by algorithms. This phenomenon resembles Horkheimer and Adorno’s (2006) concept of *pseudo-individuality*, an illusion of personalization that is, in reality, a subtle homogenization strategy. Today, this illusion reaches more extreme levels, where ads can speak in the language, style, or even with faces resembling users’ favorite celebrities to sell specific products.

Commodity fetishism has become more sophisticated and personal. Commodities are not only framed by cultural meaning but are dynamically reproduced based on consumption data, prior interactions, and even users’ moods. Every click, like, or comment reinforces the logic of targeting and integrates consumption with individual identity. If Marx understood fetishism as the separation between social relations and material products, in the digital era fetishism severs the link between identity and agency—identity becomes a performance optimized for algorithmic capital (Butler, 1990). The blurring of commercial and non-commercial spaces reinforces this condition. Entertainment content, news, and social media are now infused with branded content, product placements, and native advertising, creating a hyper-commercial space where every text can potentially become a site of commodification. Even forms of resistance—such as parody ads, critical memes, or ironic campaigns—are often absorbed back into the commercial virality machine.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a constructivist paradigm with an interpretative qualitative approach, emphasizing an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of gender commodification in digital spaces. This paradigm was chosen because it aligns with the nature of the research, which seeks to explore the construction of meaning and complex social practices within the context of digital platform culture (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative approach enables the researcher to analyze the nuances of gender performativity and affective economic mechanisms that cannot be quantified.

The study employs a digital ethnography approach focusing on three main social media platforms: Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. This approach was selected for its ability to capture the dynamics of gender representation and affective economic practices as they naturally occur in digital spaces. Data were collected entirely through focused observation of creators' practices within the platform contexts.

Data collection spanned eight months (January–August 2024) to ensure pattern repetition and detect changes in creators' strategies. The observation followed three main steps. First, content documentation through archiving creators' posts (via screenshots and screen recordings) highlighting narratives of emotional openness (vulnerability), ritualized care practices, and strategies related to algorithmic logic (e.g., using popular hashtags or optimized interaction patterns). Second, analyzing comments and interactions to understand how audiences respond to content emphasizing gender performativity and care. Third, monitoring engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares) to identify content that most effectively operates affective economic logic.

Overall, the study analyzed 500 Instagram posts from lifestyle and beauty creators, 300 TikTok videos associated with popular hashtags such as #beauty, #healing, and #selfcare, and 100 YouTube videos of at least 10 minutes in duration focusing on wellness and feminine aesthetics. The analysis focused on three main dimensions: (1) narratives framing femininity and emotion as symbolic capital, (2) visual elements reinforcing gender as a commodity, and (3) audience interaction patterns affirming or negotiating these meanings.

Collected data were analyzed thematically. This involved grouping data into emergent themes from creators' practices, such as strategies of emotional openness, ritualized self-care, and algorithmic influence. Visual readings of content—including aesthetics, captions, and hashtag usage—enriched this analysis. To maintain validity and research ethics, all informants were provided informed consent, identities were anonymized with pseudonyms, and sensitive data were kept confidential. Triangulation of sources and member checking with informants were conducted to ensure interpretations reflected their experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Digital ethnography analysis shows that Indonesian social media platforms have undergone a systematic commodification process. Three main patterns were identified:

Main Theme	Description	Example (from Data)	Implication
Vulnerability Monetization	Strategies displaying personal vulnerability (confessions, sadness) to attract engagement & financial support	Creators share sad stories to solicit "buy me a coffee" donations	Vulnerability becomes capital: social value → economic value
Care Ritualization	Repetitive practices of giving attention (likes, empathetic comments) turning into social routines	Followers comment "stay strong" on every post with sad stories	Care is no longer spontaneous but a normalized interaction to maintain an empathetic image
Algorithm & Control	Algorithms amplify emotional content to trigger higher engagement	Sad posts appear more often on FYP/timelines than ordinary content	Platforms direct collective emotions for engagement capitalization
Affective Fetishism	Feelings and care are positioned as valuable and exchangeable objects	Likes, comments, gifts considered proof of love & loyalty	Affection becomes a commodity; user relationships measured by intensity of symbolic interactions

Relationship Between Themes: Vulnerability Monetization → triggers Care Ritualization → reinforced by Algorithms → forms Fetishism → cycles back to Monetization.

Observations show that emotional expressions on social media not only function as social interactions but also integrate into the logic of affective capitalism. Digital creators often display vulnerability, sharing sad stories or personal experiences to attract engagement and open financial support channels via donations or "buy me a coffee" services. This practice demonstrates how personal vulnerability can be converted into economic capital, where social value such as empathy and moral support is transformed into financial assets.

Moreover, care ritualization demonstrates how empathic interactions between followers and creators have become a social routine. Followers consistently leave motivational comments or express empathy whenever a creator posts content highlighting vulnerability. This indicates that care is no longer spontaneous but standardized as an interaction norm that maintains the creator's empathetic image while also serving as symbolic capitalization.

The role of algorithms in shaping engagement is also evident. Posts emphasizing sadness or vulnerability are more likely to appear on FYP or followers' timelines than ordinary content, signaling that platforms regulate collective attention flows to maximize interaction and engagement. In other words, algorithms act as control mechanisms directing users' emotional responses to enhance content capitalization.

Affective fetishism emerges when feelings and expressions of care are positioned as valuable and exchangeable objects. Likes, comments, or gifts are not merely social interactions but are treated as symbolic proofs of loyalty or "love" for creators. This demonstrates that affection has become a digital commodity, where the intensity of symbolic interaction serves as a value indicator in user relationships. Consequently, these practices confirm that emotions, care, and digital identity are no longer purely personal but are capitalized and optimized according to platform economic logic.

Gender as Digital Performance: Fetishizing Femininity and Masculinity Online

If Marx emphasized fetishism in material commodities, the digital era presents a more subtle form of fetishism: fetishism of identity, particularly gender. On social media platforms, gender is not only a social category but also a performativity that is deliberately curated. Butler (1990) argues that gender is not an inherent trait but a performance that is repeated and regulated by social norms. In the digital context, this repetition occurs not only through social interaction but also mediated and monetized by algorithms and platform infrastructures. In other words, gender performativity today is not merely a social practice but also a commodity produced, reproduced, and marketed within digital ecosystems. Every pose, filter, or caption

becomes a performative act shaping the digital reality of gender. Feminine or masculine expressions do not emerge freely but operate within an attention economy, where algorithms assess, highlight, and assign value to particular expressions. For instance, the "soft girl" aesthetic on Instagram, healing content trends on TikTok, or the alpha male image in motivational content are not just styles—they are semiotic strategies that exchange gender signs for visibility, social capital, and even monetization opportunities.

Barthes (1972) refers to this phenomenon as *myth*, a process of connotation that naturalizes ideology as an innate trait. When creators share sad stories or vulnerability (monetizing vulnerability), feminine gestures such as gentleness, empathy, and care are repeated to attract engagement. Followers' comments or likes are not only social support but also economic symbols of affective value being capitalized. Here, feminine attributes become *commodity-signs*, symbols exchanging gender performance for visibility, loyalty, and social capital. Conversely, masculine performances—such as assertiveness or leadership—are marketed through similar narrative strategies, but represented in ways consistent with masculine social norms on specific platforms. The ritualization of care, where empathetic interaction becomes a social routine, demonstrates how algorithms amplify emotional content to increase engagement. This creates pressure for creators to maintain expected gender performances, making self-expression appear natural but actually calculated. In other words, femininity and masculinity on social media are not only constructed through social interaction but also optimized by algorithms that evaluate and assign value to specific expressions. Affective fetishism reinforces this mechanism, converting emotions, attention, and vulnerability into symbolic assets. Likes, comments, or gifts become proof of loyalty and the economic value of gender performance. This phenomenon underscores that online femininity and masculinity are semiotic constructions capitalized in alignment with Butler's theory of gender as performance and Marx's theory of commodity fetishism.

Observations indicate that gender performance on social media manifests not only as an expression of personal identity but also as a commodifiable asset that can be measured, evaluated, and monetized. In this subsection, we discuss several key

mechanisms shaping gender performance in digital spaces, including vulnerability monetization, the ritualization of care, algorithms as gender curators, and affective fetishism.

Vulnerability Monetization. In the digital era, emotional vulnerability is not merely a form of self-expression but also an economic asset. Creators who share personal struggles, mental health experiences, or intimate moments often achieve high engagement through likes, comments, or gifts. This phenomenon demonstrates that feminine gestures—such as gentleness, empathy, and care—can function as *commodity-signs*, exchanging gender performance for visibility, follower loyalty, and social capital. For instance, sharing “mental health venting” or self-healing processes is presented as authenticity, yet is often strategically calculated to maximize engagement. Here, authenticity becomes a strategy: appearing genuine while curated through optimal timing, filters, and narrative to capture audience attention. In other words, feminine vulnerability becomes an object of capitalization, aligned with the logic of emotional capitalism.

Ritualization of Care. This refers to patterns of empathetic interaction that become social routines on digital platforms. Comment responses, emotional support, and public attention form part of the algorithmic mechanisms that amplify emotional content. Algorithms are not neutral; they prioritize representations consistent with dominant gender norms, encouraging creators to maintain certain performances. Gender performances appear natural but are in fact calculated and optimized to meet audience and algorithmic expectations. Femininity is often associated with care and intimacy, whereas masculinity is positioned as strength, assertiveness, or leadership. In this context, every affective interaction becomes part of the platform’s economic logic, where engagement translates into both symbolic and financial value.

Algorithms as Gender Curators. Digital platforms play a curatorial role in reinforcing gender norms. Algorithms give higher visibility to performances that conform to dominant stereotypes: femininity that is “camera-friendly,” gentle, and empathetic, and masculinity that is strong, independent, and rational. Conversely, deviant or subversive gender expressions are often marginalized. This creates a visibility hierarchy that reinforces specific gender roles while shaping how users see

and are seen. Within this framework, gender performance is not merely a social construct but also a technological product that can be optimized, measured, and marketed. Gender identities appear natural and authentic, yet are entangled in digital economic relations and algorithms—akin to Marx's notion of commodity fetishism, where commodities seem to possess their own "magical power."

Affective Gender Fetishism. Gender fetishism in digital spaces acquires an additional dimension: emotions as commodities. Femininity displaying vulnerability, care, or intimacy is transformed into symbolic assets; masculinity associated with leadership or protection can enhance economic appeal. High engagement through likes, comments, or gifts becomes evidence of affection converted into economic value—whether via platform monetization, endorsements, or sellable personal reputation. Digital spaces also allow for potential resistance, as Butler describes through performative failure. Remixes, memes, or subversive practices may disrupt dominant narratives, though these practices are often reabsorbed into the logic of virality and monetization. Thus, online femininity and masculinity are shaped not only through social interaction but also optimized through algorithms, monetization, and affective capitalization.

This logic reveals two key points: first, gender fetishism operates by objectifying masculine and feminine attributes as "emotional added value" within digital interactions. Second, emotion-based social control is exercised through familiar gender scripts, appearing natural while actually engineered through economic and political mechanisms. Users seem to have the freedom to express gender on social media, but that freedom exists within algorithmic frameworks prioritizing specific performances for engagement, and ultimately for capital. Gender as digital performance is therefore not merely identity expression but also an economic strategy orchestrated by platform systems. This reinforces the thesis that contemporary digital culture does not only produce content but also regulates bodies, affect, and gender relations to ensure the smooth accumulation of capital. This represents a new form of invisible control: capitalism governs us through commodified feelings, care, and intimacy.

From Commodity to Affective Economies

Observations indicate that the development of commodity-sign constructions through digital media extends beyond the mere creation of symbolic meanings for products, evolving into a more complex and immersive transformation. In the context of contemporary digital culture, commodity signs increasingly interact with users' emotional experiences, alongside the rise of affective economies. Whereas traditional theory links commodity value primarily to status symbols, lifestyle, or social identity (Williamson, 1978), in digital culture, this value is amplified through the production and circulation of emotions accompanying consumption. In other words, consuming commodities not only signals who we are but also shapes how we feel about ourselves in interaction with products and digital platforms. For instance, e-commerce notifications themed around self-care following mental health product searches, or recommendations for calming content on social media after interaction patterns indicate stress, reflect how commodities “deliver” emotional experiences to users.

This transformation occurs through several key mechanisms. First, interactivity and personalization enable users to experience more intense emotional engagement, making consumption more immersive. Second, data mining is used not only to increase advertising precision but also to understand users' emotional patterns, allowing affective experiences to be curated and monetized. Thus, digital capitalism shifts from persuasive strategies focused solely on identity or status toward strategies that manage users' feelings and emotional experiences. This phenomenon can also be understood as a mutation of Marx's concept of commodity fetishism (1976). In the digital era, commodities are deemed “magical” not merely for their exchange value but also for their ability to promise intimacy, comfort, and care. Commodities play a dual role: as social signs and as personalized emotional experiences. In other words, commodity value now resides in the affective experiences facilitated through digital interactions, forming a more complex relationship among consumers, products, and platforms.

These findings suggest that digital economies not only transform how we perceive goods and services but also reshape our social and emotional relations. Commodities are no longer static; they circulate within networks of affection

generated by algorithms, social interactions, and personalized marketing strategies, making user experience the core of new economic value. The shift from commodity-signs to affective economies becomes increasingly complex when gender is considered. In digital ecosystems, emotional capitalism is not gender-neutral; rather, it operates through gendered differentiation to maximize the affective value of commodities. In this sense, gender is not merely a biological category but a performative practice that is produced, repeated, and recoded through digital interactions, algorithms, and marketing strategies (Butler, 1990).

This phenomenon is observable in contemporary marketing practices. Beauty brands, wellness services, or mental health platforms often employ empathetic language and care narratives historically associated with femininity. These gestures and narratives not only emphasize particular gender identities but also create emotional bonds between consumers and products, turning vulnerability, care, and warmth into monetizable affective assets. Conversely, masculine-oriented products—such as gaming gear or automotive goods—are linked to performance, strength, or dominance, yet they too are infused with affective elements, such as “brotherhood” campaigns in gaming communities emphasizing solidarity and emotional connection. Here, emotions become gendered commodities: women are guided to “give and receive care,” while men are encouraged to “assert control while maintaining connection” with their social environment. These practices illustrate how digital capitalism integrates gender fetishism—objectifying masculine or feminine attributes—with emotional capitalism, monetizing attention, warmth, and the sense of security.

The mechanisms enabling this process can be explained through two main dimensions: first, **production of gendered identities according to market logic**: digital platforms and marketing strategies guide users to perform gender in ways that align with social norms and commercial trends. Second, **insertion of emotional value into digital interactions**: platform algorithms and design emphasize affective interactions—such as comments, likes, gifts, or reactions—making social relations appear more intimate while being calculated to boost engagement and monetization. Gender as digital performance thus emerges not only from individual expression on social media but also from the shaping, directing, and management of gendered

interactions by the digital system itself. Emotional interactions and gendered bodies become sources of economic value, making the management of emotions and gender performance in digital spaces not merely a cultural matter but also a strategic economic-political concern for digital capitalism.

Fetishism, Care, and Control in Digital Culture

Digital culture accelerates and deepens this shift. In an ecosystem driven by big data, algorithms, and the attention economy, emotions are treated as metrics that can be measured and monetized. Every like, emoji reaction, or watch time on specific content becomes affective data processed to predict and trigger the next emotional response. In other words, digital capitalism does not merely sell products; it curates moods—offering soothing content when we are anxious, suggesting wellness products when we feel stressed, or recommending romantic movies when we appear lonely. Within this logic, commodities transform into personalized emotional experiences, packaged with care narratives and wrapped in rhetoric of authenticity. Yet behind this rhetoric lies a subtle mechanism of control: capitalism does not only dictate what we buy, but also how we feel and when we should feel it. The care offered by platforms is not pure care; it is care produced for capital accumulation.

This phenomenon also reveals how affect is positioned as a tool for social management. When algorithms recommend inspirational content or self-care products, it is not out of concern, but because our emotional behaviors present economic opportunities. Affect becomes a tool of control manipulated by capital. It binds subjects not through coercion, but through a sense of safety and comfort. The shift from commodity-sign to affective commodity is not merely an issue of advertising aesthetics; it signals a profound restructuring of the relationship between capital, subjects, and affect. Emotional capitalism teaches us that love, empathy, and care are no longer merely moral values, but economic assets to be optimized.

When Marx proposed the concept of commodity fetishism, he revealed a mystifying mechanism that made products appear to have inherent value and magical power, although both actually stemmed from hidden social relations behind production. In contemporary capitalism, particularly in the digital era, this mechanism not only persists but undergoes significant mutation. Commodities are no longer

merely imbued with symbolic meaning; they seep into affect, identity, and social relations, creating a new form of fetishism attached not only to objects but also to emotions and gender performance. Whereas in early consumer capitalism commodities were invested with social markers representing status and lifestyle, in today's digital phase commodities no longer stop at semiotic function. They penetrate more intimate realms: affect, taste, and social relations. This transformation produces what Eva Illouz (2007) calls emotional capitalism—a politico-economic regime that merges market logic with emotional logic, turning emotions not merely into residuals of social life but into resources that can be managed, produced, and monetized. Under emotional capitalism, personal relationships, self-care practices, and even expressions of empathy are positioned as value-added commodities. Emotions no longer merely accompany transactions; they become the core of the consumption experience itself. Whereas perfume ads once sold "glamorous lifestyles," they now sell "feeling loved," "emotional connection," or "self-love." This form of persuasion shows how the market no longer simply decorates products with images but infiltrates the affective structure of subjects: how we feel, love, and care for ourselves.

This transformation is underpinned by what Illouz (2007) calls emotional capitalism—a politico-economic regime merging market logic with emotional logic. In this framework, emotions cease to be residuals of human interaction and become strategic resources that can be produced, managed, and monetized. Digital culture accelerates this process through algorithms and the attention economy, which measure and predict our emotions to maximize engagement. In other words, contemporary capitalism not only sells goods but also regulates moods and affective experiences, presenting an illusion of care (engineered care) that ultimately serves capital accumulation. However, this process is never gender-neutral. On the contrary, it operates through gender differentiation by assigning attributes such as empathy, gentleness, and self-care—which have historically been coded as feminine—as high-value emotional assets. In platform ecosystems, gender becomes a performance that can be capitalized: women are directed to produce narratives of care and authenticity, while men blend masculinity with a touch of care to create a "humanized" yet dominant persona. This pattern revives gender fetishism, making gendered attributes

appear natural, even though they are born from algorithmic calculations and market logic.

Commodity fetishism in the digital era has shifted into affective and gendered fetishism. What is marketed is no longer merely material objects but emotional experiences, intimacy, and identity expression. Digital platforms create affective infrastructures that normalize emotional labor as a prerequisite for visibility while packaging it within rhetoric of freedom and authenticity. Yet this freedom operates under subtle control mechanisms—not through prohibition but through the optimization of feelings and performances to align with capital logic. At this point, we can see how three key elements—commodity, care, and control—intertwine within digital culture. Commodities are no longer mere objects; they are emotions for sale. Care is no longer merely ethical; it is a branding strategy. And control no longer appears as coercion; it operates through algorithmic design and gender norms that determine who is visible, how they should appear, and what is valued. This is the new face of capitalism: a regime that governs not through violence, but through the fetishism of feeling, body, and identity—making us believe that we are freely expressing ourselves, while in reality, we are laboring for the attention economy.

CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals that contemporary digital culture is not merely a space for communication, but a machine for commodifying identity, operating through three main mechanisms: commodity fetishism migrating into the affective realm, emotional capitalism that positions emotions as economic assets, and algorithmic control shaping gender performance as a market strategy. Within this context, gender is no longer understood as a stable social category but as a digital performativity subject to capitalization.

First, the concept of commodity fetishism undergoes a fundamental transformation. While initially fetishism was attached to material goods, in platform economies it attaches to emotions, authenticity, and gender identity. Aesthetics of femininity (gentleness, empathy, vulnerability) and masculinity (strength, rationality, “masculine care”) are marketed as value-added assets that can be monetized through engagement logic. These attributes appear as if they are natural traits of individuals, yet they are

products of algorithmic calculation and personal branding strategies.

Second, the findings demonstrate that emotional capitalism not only relies on commodifying expression but also organizes an affective economy linking visibility to economic value. Likes, shares, and comments function as metrics of emotional performativity, while narratives of "care" and "authenticity" become key capital for attracting attention. In other words, freedom of expression on social media operates under subtle control mechanisms, where algorithms and gender norms determine who is deemed worthy of virality and how "authenticity" should be displayed.

Third, control within digital culture operates non-repressively. Rather than prohibiting, it optimizes affect through platform design, popular aesthetics, and algorithmic curation. This creates an illusion of freedom and autonomy, while digital subjects remain enmeshed in the logic of capital accumulation. Even resistance to dominant gender norms—through parody, memes, or subversive content—is often reabsorbed into the virality economy, demonstrating capitalism's capacity to co-opt even forms of opposition.

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