

Cultural Consumption in the Age of TikTok. Algorithmic Infrastructures and Popular Practices

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1. Introduction

In recent years platforms and their algorithms have taken on a more intense function in structuring tastes and desires across many fields: at the same time, their growing diffusion and importance has greatly extended the scope of platformization, making platforms relevant to a much wider range of actors and activities.

These two tendencies – an intensification of the infrastructural power of platforms, and their increasing popular appropriation – can be illustrated by the arrival of TikTok. Coming out of a Chinese path of development, distinct from the Silicon Valley origins of the preceding generation of platforms like Facebook, Instagram or Amazon (Arvidsson & Guo, 2026; Williams & Gilbert, 2022), the rapid growth of TikTok has introduced a new global paradigm of platformization, in the sense that formerly dominant platforms like Facebook and Instagram is now imitating many of its distinct features. This ‘tiktokization’ of social media (Schwarz, 2025, p. 7) has promoted two major novelties across platform cultures.

First TikTok tends to privilege algorithmic mediation over the ‘social graph’ model that structured (earlier versions) of Silicon Valley social media platforms. That is, the TikTok algorithm does not privilege the interests and activities that manifest in users’ social network in determining the distribution of content. Rather, it uses a complex array of factors that include detailed data on individual user behaviour (scroll time, or time spent watching videos) along

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with data on momentary trends as well as local developments. This way TikTok replaces the traditional social media public—embodied in a network of followers or of hashtags—with a social media experience organized around a ‘clustered public’ (Gerbaudo, 2024) of disconnected users, who do not share a common digital ‘space’, but rather are served content on the basis of a statistical analysis of expressed interests and doings, along with geographical proximity and momentary trends like songs, gags or dance moves (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). TikTok’s algorithm thus provides an alternative infrastructure for the determination of tastes and the diffusion of content. Indeed, some suggest that TikTok should not be understood as a *social* medium at all, but rather as a novel form of ‘algorithmic media’ (Liang, 2022) that shares important characteristics with the flow experience of television (Faltese et al. 2023), albeit a personalized television that caters to the local and the momentarily popular.

At the same time, TikTok—and the novel social media environment that the platform has inspired—has significantly lowered the barriers for participation. While Instagram, the main platform for the ‘influencer economy’ of the 2010s, tended to impose a unified aesthetic—what Lev Manovich (2017) called ‘Instagramism’—that required a significant amount of cultural capital to realize, TikTok is open to a wide diversity of content, also coming from what Lin and de Kloet (2023) call ‘unlikely content creators’ of popular origins. As a result, TikTok has been appropriated by a wide variety of users who use the platform not simply to stage a marketable self (Gershon, 2014) but also to pursue a wide range of ‘industrious’ small scale enterprises: dropshipping, livestreaming, micro-influencing a wide variety of similar ‘digital hustles’ that often supplement family incomes (Arvidsson et al. 2025).

In this special issue we want to explore how these two novel features – intrinsic not just to TikTok, but increasingly to the novel ‘tiktokized’ digital environment overall – play out across platform cultures. The papers address the growing importance of platforms as infrastructures of cultural and social life, and their resulting prevalence as mediators of a wider variety of activities on the part of a greater diversity of actors.

The issue is organized into two thematically interconnected sections. *Section I, Platformization and Algorithmic Interplay*, investigates the epistemic and empirical foundations of social research in algorithmically mediated spaces in this novel platform environment. It focuses on methodological innovations (such as digital data donation and adaptive frameworks), shifting patterns of cultural consumption, and users’ agency within the evolving affordances of social media platforms. This section examines how algorithmic infrastructures and datafication processes are transforming both research tools and interpretative models, with particular attention to issues of algorithmic awareness and consumer behaviours on platforms like TikTok and YouTube. These

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contributions provide analytical insights into how platform-specific logics shape both research practices and everyday content engagement, illuminating the fluid boundaries between media production, consumption, and interpretation in platformized environments.

Section II, Popular platform practices, shifts the focus to vernacular uses of platforms and grassroots digital agency. Contributions in this section explore how micro-entrepreneurs, informal sellers, influencers, and everyday users engage with and respond to algorithmic systems in creative, strategic, and situated ways. Through empirical analyses of TikTok cultures, generative AI chatbot landscapes, and local economies of visibility, the papers reveal the pragmatic rationalities and sociocultural repertoires that underpin digital participation from below. This section gives voice to forms of popular platform use, where creativity, survival, and cultural negotiation intertwine in the face of opaque algorithmic mechanisms. Papers in this section highlight how users—ranging from microentrepreneurs to tourist operators—navigate, negotiate, and sometimes resist algorithmic power, offering insights into hybrid models of sustainability, cultural expression, and digital capitalism after what we are tempted to call the ‘infrastructural turn’ in digital media.

2. Theoretical framework I: the infrastructural turn

The ‘infrastructural turn’ that marks the recent evolution of social media platforms invites us to consider not only what platforms make visible, but how they produce visibility itself. Platform infrastructures are invisible yet omnipresent social actors, shaping cultural consumption by structuring how content is accessed, discovered, evaluated, and stored (Caliandro et al., 2024). Datafication plays a key role in this setting. Through the systematic quantification of clicks, plays, views, etc., platforms convert culture and cultural products into data streams. Here, data are not mere economic byproducts; they are core inputs for the organization of such content and the optimization of user engagement (Pybus et al., 2025).

In platform-based environments, cultural objects such as songs, videos, or images, do not exist in a level-playing field. Instead, they occupy positions and hierarchies of prominence determined by algorithmic filtering and recommendation systems (Airoidi & Rokka, 2022). These operate according to logics that blend personalization with performance metrics, producing what may be described as a structured environment of cultural access. Put differently, while, for decades, cultural consumption has (mainly) been a matter of interpreting cultural texts within shared symbolic frameworks, it is now equally a matter of navigating datafied environments. These do not eliminate existing

forms of cultural engagement, such as interpretation, taste, or identity, but which profoundly re-mediate them (Caliandro et al., 2024). The theoretical consequences and the empirical investigation of this re-mediation, as well as the ensuing practices deriving from this shift, are the primary interest of this special issue.

2.1 Investigating “feedback cultures”

What distinguishes platform infrastructures in their structuration of cultural consumption is their recursive and dynamic nature. In this way, they do not merely transmit culture; they shape it through “feedback loops” (Beer, 2022). Not only is what we consume shaped by prior data about others’ consumption, but our own consumption is translated into metrics that feed back into the system – and which ultimately ‘feed back’ to us. Each interaction is recorded, analyzed, and re-incorporated into the system to adjust rankings and recommendations, and influence content production itself. In doing so, platforms simultaneously mediate and produce the cultural ecosystem by perpetually recalibrating it in relation to data.

This dynamic process of mutual influence between recommender algorithms and platform consumers establishes what may be called a “feedback culture”. While necessarily leaving space for serendipitous dynamics, that foster the interest of users in staying within such settings (Caliandro et al., 2024), through algorithmic filtering and interface design, platforms channel cultural engagement in structured and systematic ways. Thus, cultural consumption on digital platforms takes place within a setting whereby engagement is defined not only by content availability but by the operational logics of the underlying infrastructure. In particular, platforms feature AI models and algorithms that “learn” from users’ consumption patterns in order to recommend, filter and rank content in dynamic and highly adaptive ways (Airoldi, 2022). In turn, users largely rely on recommender algorithms to decide what to watch, listen or read next; these analyse users’ datafied behaviour to produce automated recommendations. As research in computer science shows, machine learning models seek to capture users’ preferences without accounting for the effect of their own recommendations: as a result, input data are systematically “confounded” by output predictions (Chaney et al., 2018), this determining consumers’ “repeated exposure to a certain item or category of items” (Jiang et al., 2019, p. 1; see also Baumann et al., 2025).

The social science literature has widely discussed platform-based feedback loops with reference to Pariser’s notion of “filter bubble” (2011), largely focusing on the “power” exerted by algorithms on citizens and consumers

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(Bucher, 2018). Research has mostly focused on how online algorithms influence public opinion formation (Gandini et al., 2025), often overemphasizing the power of algorithms in a technologically deterministic fashion (see Bruns, 2019). Conversely, the role of the “human in the loop” has received less attention, apart from recent works highlighting how platform users may “resist” algorithmic power and showcase various levels of “algorithmic awareness” correlated with socio-demographic variables (Bonini & Treré, 2024).

Recent sociological works stress how the effects of platform-based feedback loops on online users go well beyond the political sphere, and directly concern consumer culture and habits more broadly intended (Beer, 2022; Airoidi, 2022; Pedwell, 2021; Fourcade & Johns, 2020). In particular, scholars in the context of cultural consumption studies have long noted how recursive interactions between consumers and recommender systems are likely to strengthen past consumption patterns, eventually “normalizing” them (Hallinan & Striplas, 2016). This techno-social process is believed to induce the unaware adaptation of consumer tastes and identities to automated recommendations (Barile & Sugiyama, 2015). Yet, research on the socio-cultural effects of automated recommendations on online content consumption practices still rests, for the most part, on theoretical speculations. This lack of empirical evidence on platforms’ “feedback loops” is due to epistemological and methodological limitations: platform algorithms are often considered to be opaque “black boxes” which are “immune from scrutiny” (Pasquale, 2015) due to both technical and corporate reasons (Burrell, 2016). Both the criteria by which algorithms determine their evaluations and the consumer surveillance activities producing input and feedback data are obscured (Zuboff, 2019). Moreover, algorithmic outputs are highly personalized and changeable over time, and thus very difficult to track (Matamoros-Fernandez et al. 2021). In addition, users have a limited awareness of algorithmic systems’ activities; rather, they elaborate “imaginaries” about algorithms (Bucher, 2017), through which they fantasize on how automated systems work and might affect their behaviours (Siles, 2023) – and this further complicates the study of their platformized interactions with them. While some of the few empirical studies on platform-based feedback loops show that recommender algorithms tend to lower the diversity of content consumed by users and reinforce socially structured consumption patterns (see Airoidi, 2022; Rama et al., 2023), other papers present more nuanced and conflicting results (e.g., Matamoros-Fernandez et al. 2021; Shakespeare & Roth, 2021), thus leaving important questions on the socio-cultural role of recommender algorithms in cultural consumption open for scrutiny.

From a sociological standpoint, this raises critical interrogatives about cultural production and consumption in the platform age. Whose cultural production is more likely to be privileged by algorithmic systems? What categories of users are more likely to shape their cultural consumption in accordance with their interaction with platform infrastructures? Which aesthetic forms or genres are reinforced or subverted in their interaction with platform affordances? Can we still talk about cultural genres, when confronted with the continuous flows of ephemeral video content characterizing TikTok, Instagram or YouTube Shorts? These questions point towards the necessity of an infrastructural approach to cultural consumption, which recognizes that users encounter culture through feeds and dashboards designed to optimize consumption time and retention. Interfaces ‘nudge’ users towards certain content, while personalization protocols affect cultural discovery through efficient, frictionless, and quantifiable algorithmic matching. Yet, users respond in return, producing a recursive dynamic whereby consumption generates data, data shapes curation, and curation influences consumption back through forms of algorithmic entanglement that create new kinds of cultural experiences and imaginaries.

2.2 Toward a shifting of epistemological paradigm?

As we saw above, feedback cultures are the result of a complex socio-technical entanglement between platforms’ infrastructures, that constrain users’ practices of content production and consumption, and users’ activities of manipulation of those very same infrastructure for their own communicative goals (Arvidsson et al., 2016) – activities that are in turn datafied by the platforms themselves, in a virtually infinite cycle. To empirically address such platformized form of culture (Duffy et al., 2019), one has to take seriously and confront herself with the affordances of digital platforms, intended as an inextricably intertwining between platforms’ technical infrastructures (Gerlitz & Rieder, 2013) and the participatory cultures populating them (Rieder et al., 2018). More recently, in order to analyse cultural production and consumption within platform environments, digital methods scholars proposed to fuse together qualitative and quantitative as well as computational and manual techniques into *non-binary methods*. As Venturini (2024, p. 1) puts it, non-binary methods are “neither-quali-nor-quantitative”, they “do not comply with the norms and expectations of both qualitative and quantitative research”. On an epistemological level, this translated into an ad hoc framework that combines the *follow the medium* and *follow the user* principles.

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The *follow the medium's* concept is the epistemological pillar of the digital methods paradigm. Digital methods consider digital environments (e.g., websites, search engines, platforms) as sources of methods, rather than objects of study (Rogers, 2019). In this logic, to follow the medium means to take advantage of the natively digital methods that digital environments apply to themselves to organise digital data – as with APIs, algorithms, tags, retweets, likes, hashtags, etc. Drawing on these natively digital methods amounts to be particularly useful to map the technical structures of online environments as well as understand how such digital infrastructures shape communication, social interaction, and public discourses (Marres, 2015). Empirically, to develop this kind of analysis, researchers usually resort to computational/quantitative techniques, such as APIs calling, network analysis, text analysis, data visualization (Marres & Gerlitz, 2016). It is important to note that, as algorithmic systems and AI agents pervasively penetrate digital infrastructures and engage with their users, *follow the medium* necessarily encapsulates another methodological imperative, that is, to “follow the algorithm” (Airoidi et al., 2016), which projects sociological research toward novel more-than-human directions (Airoidi, 2022).

Anyhow, more recently, scholars started contending that, to deeply understand cultural processes playing out within digital platforms, it is not sufficient to follow the medium only (Caliandro & Gandini, 2017; Vicari & Kirby, 2023; Bounegru, 2024). In fact, platforms - as social media for instance – are populated by active users that manipulate technical infrastructures for their own purposes as well as generate and circulate a plethora of symbolic contents in/through those infrastructures. Therefore, to fully grasp such socio-cultural complexity one has to learn how to *follow the user* too – beyond the medium (Caliandro, 2024). Epistemologically, the *follow the user* principle has different declinations. First, it means to seek the help of Internet users as co-researchers, as one collaborates with them in procedures of data collection. See, for example, when one asks participants permission to install a tracking device on their personal digital media or sharing parts of their personal digital data archives (Araujo et al., 2022; Breuer et al., 2023) – a research practice that, among the other things, is more and more needed in the current post-API era (Perriam et al., 2020). Second, following the user means to map the practices of use of digital devices enacted by users as well as analyse the cultural production users attach to those devices – for example, by means of ethnographic observations and/or qualitative content analysis (Airoidi, 2018; Niederer & Colombo, 2019). Third, to follow the user implies to “take advantage of the natively digital methods that Internet users employ to gather, organise, manage and create their own digital data throughout their everyday digital practices” (Caliandro, 2024, p. 3). See for example the case of pseudo-interviews (Mahl et

al., 2021), that is, when researchers look at specific terms used by users in their profiles or conversations in order to find ad hoc keywords for further procedures of automated data collection. Or consider practices of data collection through scrapers like Zeeschuimer. Zeeschuimer is a web scraper developed by the Digital Methods Initiative to gather data from TikTok, Instagram, LinkedIn, 9GAG, Imgur, Twitter, and Douyin (Peeters, 2022), which amounts to be particularly useful to observe users' interactions with platforms' algorithms as well as algorithmic effects on users' content consumption. Zeeschuimer does not collect data via keywords, vice versa one must activate the tool on her web browser and manually scroll down the page she intends to scrape. Furthermore, before doing that, the researcher must take precise practical decisions: for example, to study eating disorder on TikTok the researcher has to create a clean browser and then 'force' the TikTok algorithm to deliver only specific kinds of content, for example videos marked with hashtags like #proana or #whatieatinaday (Bruschi et al., 2024) – keywords that she can identify only after a careful ethnographic exploration of TikTok and its subcultures (Gerrard, 2018).

Especially these two last examples make clear that following the user is not simply a matter of mixing quantitative/computational and qualitative/manual techniques, rather fusing them together in the very same research design. In fact, both the automated processes of data collection that we saw in pseudo-interviews and scraping are not possible without prior and/or parallel ethnographic interventions. Therefore, when exploring digital platforms, from a socio-anthropological perspective, it is not possible to follow the medium without following the user, and vice versa (Caliandro et al., 2024).

2.3 Article presentation

All the key sociological questions as well as epistemological complexity discussed above are well addressed by the six papers composing the first section of this volume (i.e. *Platformization and Algorithmic Interplay*). In the article opening the section (*Post-Digital Data-Gathering and the adaptive epistemological framework: Navigating the Human-Algorithm-Platform Nexus?*), Gabriella Punziano, Suania Acampa, and Giuseppe Padricelli reflect on the methodological and epistemological challenges of studying human-algorithm-platform interactions. To address these challenges, the authors, on the one hand, theorize an adaptive epistemological framework that emphasises flexibility, plurality and reflexivity in research design; on the other hand, they introduce the notion of 'data hybridization', intended as methodological paradigm capable of capturing active

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engagement and passive traces through a comparative analysis of digital and computational ethnography, web scraping, APIs, and data donation.

The second contribution '*Young People and Digital Consumption: Profiles and Empirical Pathways in the Algorithmic Age*', featured by Domenico Trezza, starts addressing the question of human-algorithm-platform interactions more empirically. Specifically, the author investigates how youth's consumption of digital content on YouTube and TikTok is influenced by key dimensions such as accessibility, usage intensity, digital skills, and algorithmic awareness. Drawing on survey data (collected from 449 young adults living in Campania and Lombardy) and advanced statistical analysis, the paper argues that frequent platform use alone does not ensure critical engagement towards platforms' logics and algorithmic infrastructures; rather, the quality of digital competencies emerges as the key driver in fostering algorithmic awareness.

The third contribution '*Between platforms and habits: A qualitative study of cultural consumption in the digital age*' by Noemi Crescentini, dialogues very well with Trezza's work, since it continues exploring digital consumption habits on YouTube and TikTok, but from a deep qualitative perspective. Specifically, Crescentini foregrounds the role of algorithmic recommendation systems in shaping users' cultural repertoires, emotions and identity trajectories. Drawing on 50 in-depth interviews (conducted through eliciting techniques with Italian users), the author comes to two key conclusions: 1) different platforms foster different patterns of digital consumption: YouTube favours more reflexive and slow forms of content consumption, while TikTok favours practices of rapid emotional engagement and continuous immersion; 2) participants live in a constant tensions (or battle so to speak) between active attempts at reappropriation and passive acceptance of algorithmic dynamics.

The fourth contribution is titled '*Manipulating The Flow: Teenagers copiloting social media consumption*', by Luca Giuffré. Here the author keeps investigating the role of algorithmic recommendation systems on youth's patterns of digital consumption by means of qualitative methods. Grounded in the analysis of several group interviews conducted with 100 social media users aged 17–19, Giuffré puts forth the notion of 'copilot practices', understood as everyday tactics of manipulation of the continuous flow of digital content shaped and curated by social media platforms' algorithms. Drawing on the notion of copilot practices, Giuffré successfully distances himself from mainstream conceptions of teenagers as passive, unaware, and vulnerable social media consumers. Instead, he understands them as active users who (by means of practices of liking, commenting, or intentionally misdirecting algorithmic preferences) resist and strategically navigate algorithmic flows to construct their very own experiences of content consumption - thus demonstrating a subtle and nuanced understanding of algorithmic logic.

In the fifth contribution (*Algorithmic Medias Res: YouTube Shorts, Affordances, and the Reconfiguration of Agency in Digital Consumption Practices*), Ilir Rama continues the exploration of algorithmic flows of social media content, this time adopting a macro perspective focused on platform infrastructure and employing quantitative and computational methods. His paper investigates how YouTube shapes digital consumption through a longitudinal study based on a dataset of over three million data points collected from 107 Italian users over a ten-year period. The analysis triangulates users' search behavior with the content they actually consumed, aiming to understand how individuals interact with algorithmic recommendations - particularly in light of structural changes to the platform, such as the introduction of YouTube Shorts. Findings show that users have increasingly moved away from manual search, relying more heavily on algorithmically recommended content. This indicates that technical affordances reshape user agency, beyond mere algorithmic optimization. The study argues that agency does not lie solely with users or platforms, but is co-constructed through the interplay of technical, social, and cultural factors.

The last paper of the section (*Data Donation from YouTube and TikTok Users: How We Implemented It*), authored by Andrea Russo and Dario Pizzul, addresses one of the most challenging techniques of data collection in the field of digital methods: data donation. In response to the limitations of the post-API era, the authors advocate for user-centric strategies, especially data donation, where participants voluntarily share their digital traces. Their contribution draws on the AlgoFeed project, involving 240 participants who donated their YouTube and TikTok data to explore the feedback dynamics between algorithms and user behavior. The article outlines the sampling strategy, data processing methods, contextual enrichment, and legal compliance within the EU regulatory framework. By presenting an example of analysis, the paper demonstrates how data donation offers a valuable alternative to platform-dependent methods, promoting ethically sound, participatory, and context-rich digital research. It fills a critical methodological gap by offering a replicable model for future empirical studies.

3. Theoretical framework II: platformization from below

The prevalence of platforms as cultural and social infrastructures has also led to a vast increase in the numbers and diversity of people who are using them, as well as the purposes for which they are used. While large commercial brands still attract a lot of traffic on social media platforms, recent years, and in particular after the Covid pandemic, has also seen the platformization of a series of economic activities centred on small-scale actors, be this the 'hipster

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economy' organized around the vintage and craft trends (Gerosa, 2024); the platformization of the global bazaar economy where 'traders and tinkers' (Deka, 2023) across the globe have discovered Instagram (along with Tiktok, Temu & Alibaba) as a compliment to more traditional market stalls, or the rise of a series of practices of 'digital hustle' like drop-shipping or affiliate marketing, as sources of income also for the global popular classes (Ticona, 2022). At the same time the influencer economy of the '10s has been paralleled by a more widespread 'creator' economy populated by 'micro-influencers' that features a more egalitarian distribution of influence and income (Hund, 2023). These developments have also been favoured by the global rise of Tiktok, which has further democratized social media participation, while at the same time promoting forms of self-presentation that are further from the celebrity aesthetics of what Alice Marwick (2015) called 'Instafame' and closer to the *longue-durée* of everyday life. What Bainotti (2024) calls 'micro-influencers' has become a growing concern for the online marketing industry. Micro-influencers are more relatable and closer to regular users and consumers than classical Internet celebrities (Abidin, 2016). They also tend to communicate and gossip with each other and form communities of support (Bishop, 2019). Research on micro-influencers have tended to locate them to more communitarian publics, kept together by precise interests like vintage fashion of vinyl, travel or cooking. They are engaged in multifaceted 'visibility labour' (Abidin, 2016) that involves taking selfies, videos and other forms of content, but also, increasingly interacting with and relating to followers. Indeed, many now speak of a more distributed 'creator economy' populated by a wide diversity of creators who, on average have lower levels of influence and make less money than the original al stars of Instafame, and who have a wider variety of geographical origins (including the Chinese Wanghong phenomenon, Craig et al. 2021). Such 'content creators' tend to favour the provision of use value, in the form of relatable content, over curated self-branding practices.

This transformation has been favoured by the arrival and affirmation (in particular during the pandemic years) of new platforms like Tiktok, Twitch and Onlyfans that favour interactivity and 'use value' over spectacular self-representation. The affordances of Tiktok has made the new platform conducive to a different aesthetic. Tiktok tends to be less dominated by powerful influencers, and more oriented towards showcasing content that stays close to the everyday world of its users. It invites the production of content that lends itself to be commented, shared and otherwise engaged with, and thus tends to favour aesthetic pleasure and use value over Instafame. Tiktok's algorithm consistently selects videos with low viewership figures and thus enables the seemingly random overnight rise to trending status also of material from ordinary users. As Guinaudeau et al. (2022) describe it, Tiktok has

substantially changed the logic of the online reputation economy by offering a platform structured according to a logic that is more bottom-up and populist than Instagram's traditionally elitist and spectacular aesthetic.

Another important driver has been the platformization of a number of activities related to emerging small-scale economic practices have come to increasingly rely on social media platforms like Tik Tok or Instagram as avenues for promotion and distribution (Kneese & Palm, 2020; Gerosa, 2021). The vintage fashion trade, food trucks and a range of neo artisanal practices have developed for a long time as part of a mostly urban 'hipster economy' where low earnings are compensated by high levels of passionate work, and where economic value is contingent on the creation and maintenance of communitarian relations in which goods as well as the people who make and sell them can be 'embedded'. Such hipster micro-enterprises have long been dependent on the internet for their business: Etsy for neo craft, Twitter for food trucks, Craigslist for the vintage trade. However emerging studies indicate that during the pandemic, they began to migrate *en mass* to Instagram as well as TikTok. This development has been well documented in the case of the vintage fashion trade where the pandemic years saw an overall 'platformization of the vintage market' driving vintage traders to engage in new forms of 'listing labor' where they would showcase aspects of their handling and enjoying of the goods they sold on Instagram: posting pictures of themselves repairing or repackaging vintage vinyl records or dancing around in vintage dresses (Kneese et al, 2022). Given the predominately home-based nature of their commercial activities, along with the enforced domesticity that came with the Covid lockdowns, this amounted to a new way of exploiting the affordances of social media platforms in which 'the home becomes a storefront on Instagram' (Kneese et al., 2022).

There are also indications that this 'hipster economy' has spread beyond its origins in the Global Cities of the North, involving places like India (Myambo, 2021) or Kazakhstan (Isaacs, 2023). Along with this globalization of hipsterism, post-pandemic years have seen a significant globalization of the global bazaar economy. As Deka (2023) documents, market and street vendors in the 'worlds other economy' (Matthews et al., 2012) have turned to social media platforms like Flipcart, Temu or Alibaba, but also Tiktok and Instagram. Initially this was a response to lockdowns, but the practices seem to have persisted, also as many cities of the South, like Bangkok (Boonjubun, 2017) or Mumbai (Anjaria, 2016), has ramped up the repression of unregulated street vendors, and as local delivery platforms like Grab or Zomato have established themselves as alternatives. Along with this a wide range of social media based industrious pursuits, like fast fashion reselling, small scale businesses related to niches like street fashion or sneaker culture have begun to populate social media platforms (Affuso & Scott, 2023), along with the multifaceted practices of 'the digital

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hustle’ - in the form of affiliate marketing or ‘dropshipping’ that, as Julia Ticona (2022) documents, are spreading as sources of supplementary income for the global popular classes.

3.1 *Studying TikTok in Naples*

The second part of this special issue investigates this novel popular and embedded nature of platform practices by investigating how it plays out in the context of popular practices and economies in Naples. The city of Naples is particular in this respect. Like in many ‘Southern’ contexts, (Mazumdar, 2022) TikTok, along with its social media infrastructure has been integrated in within the existing popular economies of the city, traditionally composed of small-scale family ventures, often bordering on an informal economy that is estimated to amount to 30 per cent of local GDP. Such popular, small-scale entrepreneurial practices have been a constant feature of the city since the post-War years- and in certain neighbourhoods even further back. They have expanded in importance as a source of popular sustenance as de-industrialization set in in the 1970s and as many traditional artisanal occupations subsequently disappeared (Dines, 2022). The addition of digital media and platforms has created a baroque digital economy that, while globalized in the sense that its supply chains run far away to China, Turkey, North Africa and Latin America, remains embedded in neighbourhoods and local traditions.

This way TikTok and the new platform environment has empowered possibilities for small -scale ‘digital hustles’. The resulting resurgence, of local, family based industrious economic practices, in combination with the novel digital landscape has made Naples central to TikTok in Italy: a growing number of trends, in music, fashion, youth culture and gastronomy originate in the city, and a number of street vendors, chefs, butchers, proprietors of market stalls and ordinary housewives with distinct Neapolitan characteristics have risen to national fame. The tourist book that has marked the city in the post-Covid years has provided novel opportunities for such small-scale industrious practices. This has also meant that to a large extent the tourist imaginary of the city is structured by such diffuse forms of popular participation.

In the second session of this special issue, four papers directly explore how novel platform infrastructures play out in the popular economies of Naples. *Luise and Felaco* explore what they call ‘algorithmic pragmatic rationality’, the ways in which algorithmic logics blend with, are appropriated by and come to bend and shape the kinds of traditional economic pragmatism that has marked industrious economies for centuries. *Bellafronte and Orria*, continue this empirical exploration by investigating increasingly popular practices of livestream selling,

and how such practices reconfigure informal economies within platform capitalism. Through a digital ethnography on Vinted and TikTok, the paper shows how visibility, performativity, and algorithmic governance shape precarious labour and socio-economic innovation in the context of the family. *Recano's* paper instead investigates novel forms of popular participation in the construction of a tourist imaginary. Through digital ethnography, it examines how popular actors creatively appropriate short video formats, producing situated representations that reconfigure urban imaginaries, visibility hierarchies, and consumer cultures in a trans-local mediascape. *Graziano's* paper looks at TikTok as site for the bottom-up articulation of popular gender identities, in his case a novel form of hegemonic masculinity that draws on established social media stereotypes, and combines them with locally rooted plebeian masculine ideals.

The remaining three papers instead take a wider view to investigate similar dynamics in other contexts. *Laezza's* paper takes a look at how A.I transforms bottom-up digital economies. It maps the generative AI chatbot app landscape by analysing its semantic, narrative, and functional logics. It reveals how chatbots evolve into socio-technical environments, shaping user interaction, digital infrastructures, and the everyday practices of communication, work, learning, and emotional support across diverse domains. *Volpe's* article takes a look at the growing trend of online vintage commerce to show how intimate subjective concerns like personal ethics and politics are increasingly included in strategies of self-branding. *Torre's* paper, finally, explores OnlyFans as a site of the extended participatory production of pornography, investigating the figure of the performer as a self-managed brand able to monetize her image across multiple converging platforms while drawing on cinematic conventions as well as tropes from celebrity culture.

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