

## Adaptive Informality in Platform Capitalism: From Reluctant Digitalization to Bold TikTok Commerce in Southern Italy

Brigida Orria<sup>a</sup>, Sabrina Bellafronte<sup>b</sup>

### Abstract

This article rethinks informal economies as dynamic and generative components of capitalism, moving beyond definitions that treat them as marginal or deviant. Anchored in a Global South theoretical framework, based on qualitative methods and digital ethnography conducted in Naples and the Campania region, the study introduces the notion of “adaptive commerce” and “bold e-commerce”. We explore the evolving practices of informal trade across collaborative and hypervisible platforms such as Vinted and TikTok and delineate a continuum from discretionary, anonymized exchange to emotionally saturated, algorithmically mediated live commerce. The research outlines a shift from “reluctant digitalization”, marked by caution and anonymity, to “bold digitalization”, where exposure and performativity are embraced as economic assets. Three key points underpin this research: (1) the theorization of “bold digitalization” as a mode of platform-mediated informality marked by hyper-performativity and algorithmic visibility; (2) the identification of a platform governance spectrum, ranging from transactional discretion on Vinted to affective exposure on TikTok; and (3) the conceptual linkage between domestic labor, digital precarity, and economic spectacle. Informal economies, rather than resisting digital structures, actively shape and are simultaneously shaped by platform infrastructures, becoming central arenas of neoliberal experimentation. This reconceptualization challenges Eurocentric binaries of formal/informal and highlights informal economies as both zones of exploitation and engines of social creativity and economic innovation. The article calls for a critical reassessment of informal digital labor’s sustainability, gendered burdens, and potential to catalyze new socio-economic imaginaries.

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## 1. Introduction

The rapid evolution of digital platforms has significantly transformed the contours of informal economies. This article reconceptualizes informality beyond marginal or residual spheres, as a dynamic component of contemporary capitalism. We highlight how the informal economy has structural generative and adaptive qualities, especially within the context of platform capitalism and digital labor.

Following Castells and Portes (1989), we define informality as a constitutive element of capitalism rather than its residue (Hart, 1973). We see informal economy as a spectrum of unregulated yet productive practices that operate within and through market logics without formal recognition or protection. This operational definition helps distinguish our notion of “adaptive commerce” from traditional views of informality intended as survivalism or illegality. We introduce two key concepts: “adaptive commerce”, referring to hybrid and flexible informal market practices that strategically navigate regulatory ambiguity across platforms, often characterized by anonymity and strategic regulatory evasion; and “bold digitalization”, denoting the assertive embrace of hypervisibility and performative labor as economic capital within live-streaming commerce.

The classical bazaar represented a site of flexible and face-to-face exchange, rooted in trust and community networks, and today’s digital marketplaces, exemplified by platforms like TikTok and Vinted, exhibit new logics of value creation, characterized by hypervisibility, performative labor, and algorithmic mediation. We explore the metamorphosis of informal economic practices through the lens of platform capitalism, and the transformation of informal trade absorbed by digital infrastructures. Platforms such as Vinted, Wallapop, and Facebook Marketplace exemplify this evolving terrain where users display modes of anonymity and relational engagement.

By adopting a Global South theoretical perspective, the research challenges Eurocentric binaries, such as formal/informal, legal/illegal, or modern/backward, that position informal economies as residual or deviant from capitalist “norms”. Instead, it foregrounds their generative capacity to shape novel forms of economic agency and collective organization. Within this paradigm, informal economic practices, particularly in platform-mediated

contexts, are seen as forms of strategic agency. Unlike deterministic views of digital labor, this analysis highlights how sellers actively navigate platform rules, manage identity, and optimize profit through informal tactics (e.g., off-platform transactions). Drawing on digital ethnography, discursive interviews, and participant observation in the context of Naples and the Campania region, the study investigates the interplay between commerce, creativity and community-building on social platforms. We conceptualize Naples as a “South in the North” (Mignolo & Escobar, 2010), a European territory where informal market logic, community bonds, and solidaristic practices are clustered in digitalization. Far from being anachronistic, the digital informal economy in Naples epitomizes models of work, consumption, and sociality that are increasingly spreading elsewhere.

The article addresses the following central question: How do informal economies evolve and adapt within the contemporary ecosystem of digital platforms? To explore this question, the analysis develops along three interconnected lines: 1- Conceptual, “adaptive commerce” and “bold digitalization” as notions to interpret the shifting boundaries between informality, and visibility; 2- Empirical, examining dynamics across different platforms, with particular attention to the contrasting cases of TikTok and Vinted; 3- Contextual, the experience of digital infrastructures and local economies, in Naples and the Campania region.

To answer this question, Section 2 reviews the literature on informal economies and platform capitalism; Section 3 situates informal and digital marketplaces; Section 4 presents the methodological framework; Sections 5 and 6 discuss empirical findings and theoretical implications; and Section 7 concludes with reflections on the future of digital informality.

## **2. Informal economy and platform capitalism**

The concept of the informal economy has long been central to debates on the nature of capitalist transformation. Early studies (Hart, 1973; Bagnasco, 1981) viewed informality as a response to exclusion from formal labor markets, as a survival strategy emerging at the peripheries of industrial capitalism. Later works reconceptualized informality as a constitutive dimension of capitalist development rather than its residue (Castells & Portes, 1989; Godfrey, 2011). Within this perspective, informality functions as a structural attribute of accumulation, ever-transformed by state regulation, market dynamics, and technological innovation. Recent scholarship shows how the platformization of work rearticulates older forms of informal labor through digital infrastructures (Arcidiacono & Farinella, 2023; De Nicola, 2019; Surie & Huws, 2023). The gig

economy does not simply reproduce precarity but transforms it, institutionalizing informal practices (such as flexibility, self-organization, regulatory evasion) within digital capitalism. This confirms that informality should be seen as a continuum rather than a dichotomy, encompassing activities that operate simultaneously within and beyond formal regimes of regulation (Sachs, 1988; Coletto, 2009). The informal economy in classical theories (Hart 1973; Castells & Portes 1989) thus comprises a heterogeneous array of phenomena ranging from the underground economy to illegal markets, from undeclared labor to community-based and domestic economies, as well as non-market exchanges and do-it-yourself practices (Williams & Windebank, 2001). It encompasses layered social, cultural, and economic elements whose origins can often be traced back to different historical periods (Allasino, 1988). Its roots reach across historical periods and moral economies based on trust, reciprocity, and embeddedness in community relations (Bagnasco, 1981; Thompson, 1971). More recent frameworks stress its productive and generative dimensions, as in Gago's (2017) notion of the "baroque economy", which frames informality as a creative response to structural constraints, and in Surie & Huws (2023), who analyze its reorganization through global value chains.

Braudel reminds us that capitalism itself contains a "shadow zone" beyond the transparency of market mechanisms, which can be circumvented through organizational strategies (Braudel, 1981). This dual embeddedness—within both capitalist structures and marginal spaces—invites a contextual reading of informality, attentive to historical and territorial configurations (Gibson-Graham, 1997).

In contexts where formal economies fail to guarantee full employment, informal enterprises play a dual role: they provide a means of subsistence for those excluded from the labor market, while also supplying goods and services at lower costs. This, in turn, enhances the competitiveness of formal firms (De Soto, 1989) and often leads states to tolerate such activities despite their noncompliance with fiscal regulations, recognizing them as important socio-economic stabilizers. "Platform urbanism" has become a global phenomenon. Its expansion into the Global South has drawn considerable scholarly attention for the way it successfully penetrates the informal sectors of cities, generating value in such otherwise neglected areas (Park, 2025).

The rise of platform capitalism (Srnicsek, 2017) has redefined this landscape. Platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram have created spaces where the divide between formal and informal dissolves, giving rise to new forms of digital micro-entrepreneurship based on economic hyper-performativity. Arcidiacono and Farinella (2023) describe this as a "tertiarization of informality": the re-embedding of informal practices within technologically mediated service labor. Bonini and Treré (2024) emphasize that

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these dynamics capitalize on engagement strategies and direct interaction with consumers, transforming self-representation into a monetizable asset. The commodification of individual identity thus becomes a cornerstone of the new labor landscape, where the boundary between leisure and labor becomes increasingly porous.

A side trait is the colonization of spaces traditionally outside market logic, whereby practices and goods belonging to vernacular economy (e.g., DIY culture) are transformed into salable commodities. In such cases, the home simultaneously becomes a warehouse, a production studio, and an informal workspace, erasing the line between domestic and productive spheres (Jarrett, 2015). The ability to transform any activity into work, or at least into a source of value extraction, marks a shift wherein individuals are encouraged to “make money in their free time”. Previously, earning money required sacrificing one's time for a limited period of time, with leisure in the free time as the reward. This colonization of everyday life (Cingolani, 2021) aligns with Huws's (2014) analysis of the “cybertariat” and Hochschild's (2011) concept of emotional labor permeating post-industrial households. Platform capitalism thus appropriates the spontaneity of informality, transforming it into a regime of algorithmic exploitation. Platforms like Uber or TikTok do not eliminate informal labor; they institutionalize it within systems of control and precarity (Chicchi & Marrone, 2023), often relying on unpaid “free labor” from content creators and micro-entrepreneurs (Farinella & Mostaccio, 2021).

With the advent of home banking, e-commerce, and automated services, many activities have shifted from the market to the domestic sphere, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish between work time and personal life (Casilli, 2020).

In sum, the informal economy, blended with digital platforms, forms a deeply integrated and pervasive system, capable of adapting to the structural transformations of contemporary capitalism. As indicated by Arvidsson (2020), the post-industrial condition is characterized by traits of “industrious modernity”, in which precarious individuals, often outside stable labor markets, become key actors in alternative forms of production and enterprise. In this process industriousness moved from the margins to the center, positioning informal trade like ones on TikTok as a new productive paradigm, one that is central to global production and consumption.

As previously mentioned, challenging the moralizing interpretation of informality as exclusion or disorder, instead emphasizing its innovative and creative potential, among foundational principles of the “baroque economy” Gago (2017) finds: 1) the informal as a constitutive source of reality, defined as a dynamic praxis that invents and promotes new productive, commercial, and relational forms; and 2) the informal as a source of incommensurability,

disrupting conventional value measurement by blending heterogeneous elements in value creation, thereby necessitating new institutional frameworks for recognition (Gago, 2017, p. 16).

Informality invites a multiscalar reading of markets that bridges the Global South and the Global North (Santos, 2014; Escobar, 2011). Informal economies co-produce capitalist modernity through adaptive experimentation and the negotiation of state power (Meagher, 2013; De Soto, 1989). Gago also argues that informality underpins a broader transformation in the world of work, calling for a reexamination of categories such as development, poverty, and inclusion (Gago, 2017, p. 17). At the core of this new relationship between platforms and informality is the ability to manage chaos: any space, territory, or social sphere becomes remotely governable.

### **3. Informal and digital marketplaces in global bazaars**

Urban marketplaces have long represented the archetype of informal exchange. In urban bazaars, commerce is grounded in face-to-face economies, where trust between seller and buyer is built through direct negotiation and human interaction. As Deka (2023, p. 5) notes, “Most actors absorbed in the bazaar economy globally are not from the elite section of society: they are school dropouts, refugees, and migrants to cities looking for new opportunities”. This system of exchange enables small-scale traders, often migrants or individuals with limited access to formal markets, to participate in the urban economy by leveraging minimal resources and drawing upon familial and social networks.

In contrast to these traditional dynamics, the digital marketplace represents a radical transformation of informal trade, imposing new models of exchange while diminishing the centrality of human interaction. Deka (2023, p. 9) draws a sharp contrast: “A good contrast is the digital economy of e-commerce platforms that are now the biggest competition of bazaar-level exchanges, hanging like a bridge over actual transactions with their self-sufficient manner and only distant interactions with the travails of ordinary lives.” E-commerce platforms, with their centralized infrastructures, streamline transactions and provide immediate access to a wide array of goods, but simultaneously reduce the direct interaction between vendors and customers. Despite this shift, informal marketplaces continue to coexist alongside digital models, developing new adaptive strategies. Many vendors have begun to integrate online platforms into their operations, using social media and messaging apps to reach customers while retaining elements of personalized negotiation. This suggests that digital marketplace does not replace traditional bazaars; rather, it transforms them by

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embedding core features of the informal economy within more structured and regulated technological frameworks.

To further elaborate on this transitional landscape, we propose the notion of an intermediate category, “adaptive commerce within collaborative platforms”, exemplified by marketplaces such as Vinted, Wallapop, or Facebook Marketplace. These platforms represent a hybrid model of digital informal economy, positioned between the discretion of traditional bazaars and the visibility-driven logic of TikTok commerce.

Vinted has gained international prominence, boasting over 45 million users worldwide, by appealing to individuals’ aspirations to become micro-brands and gain access to the fashion market in a way perceived as “sustainable”. It capitalizes on the topos of the sharing economy, positioning itself in contrast to the unsustainable chimera of fast fashion. Vinted is a peer-to-peer marketplace for second-hand clothes and goods, offering a means to discard what burdens daily life. Peer-to-peer exchanges on collaborative platforms reproduce the symbolic and relational dimensions of gift exchange while operating through monetized circuits. Goods re-enter commodified circulation and they conclude one social trajectory to begin another, in a process where ownership transfer is both economic and relational (Ramella & Manzo, 2019).

Such changes are symptomatic of broader evolutions in online consumer behavior. According to the latest survey ISTAT (2025), 46,8 % of Italians people aged 14 and over made at least one online purchase in 2024, up 2.2 percentage points from 2023.

The most dynamic sectors are clothing and accessories (44 %), health and beauty (39 %), and household products (31 %). Regional disparities are significant: southern Italy—particularly Campania—shows the fastest growth rate (+8 % in 2024) yet maintains a lower average expenditure per transaction than the national mean. These indicators underscore the relevance of Naples as an emerging laboratory of peripheral platformization, where informal and formal digital economies overlap.

In recent years, TikTok has evolved from a platform centered on short-form video sharing into a platformized environment conducive to shopping and social commerce. With its TikTok Shopping features, supported by e-commerce integrations and live-streaming tools, the platform fosters direct consumer engagement. Creators use the platform to present products through creative content and live videos, allowing users to purchase items directly from the livestream. This evolution corresponds with broader demographic and behavioral shifts: initially popular among younger age groups, the platform is gradually attracting older users as it becomes more mainstream. According to the latest “TikTok: Digital and Trends” report by Statista (2025a) and “Digital 2025” by We Are Social, while the 16–24 age group still constitutes the majority,

the 25–34 age segment is rapidly growing. Globally, TikTok has a slightly female-skewed user base, with women accounting for 52–60% of users, depending on the region. The platform's geographical reach is broad, with strong penetration in Asia, the U.S., and Europe.

Transaction value and sales volume on TikTok is growing; according to Statista (2025b), TikTok Shop's global Gross Merchandise Value (GMV) expanded from USD 0.9 billion in 2021 to USD 33.2 billion in 2024. This trajectory mirrors the broader compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 21.2% forecasted for the UK social commerce market between 2023 and 2028 (Retail Economics & TikTok, 2024). However, reliable and disaggregated measures of the GMV, generated exclusively through live streams, remain largely unavailable. Existing data often limited to case studies or regional reports suggest that live sessions can generate significant sales volumes (e.g., single events exceeding USD 2 million in GMV), yet the overall share of live commerce within TikTok's total transactions remains opaque, due to the nascent nature of TikTok's commercial reporting system and, most of all, to the difficulties in quantifying real-time, creator-led commerce: it remains informal and largely untraceable, "visible yet invisible".

Therefore, the territorial anchoring of these practices requires deeper attention. Fieldwork conducted in Naples and the Campania region reveals that platform practices are global, but embedded in specific local economies molded by trust and kinship. In Naples, historical networks of street trade, domestic entrepreneurship, and small-scale resale create fertile ground for the appropriation of digital tools. The city's dense social fabric and its tradition of "arrangiarsi" (the pragmatic art of making do) facilitate the migration of informal commerce onto digital platforms. Sellers often exploit overlapping social circuits: neighborhood clientele becomes an online community; family networks provide logistical support; and urban spaces, from markets to domestic interiors, are reconfigured as digital stages for commerce. These contextual dynamics distinguish Neapolitan platform practices from those observed elsewhere in Italy or Europe. In Naples, participation in Vinted or TikTok live commerce intertwines with collective resource pooling, gendered care economies, and the informal moral codes of reciprocity that historically sustain bazaars. This territorial perspective reinforces the Global-South-in-the-North framework adopted earlier, seeing Naples as a nodal site of digital informality, where global platform capitalism meets enduring local modes of economic life.

#### 4. Methodological framework

This research is guided by the following central question: How do informal economies evolve and adapt within the contemporary ecosystem of digital platforms?

Through a qualitative and multimodal ethnographic methodology, following the principles of digital ethnography (Rogers, 2013; Airoidi, 2018; Caliandro, 2018), the study applied an integrated analysis of discursive interviews, participant observation, and digital ethnography, while maintaining attention to the socio-technical specificities of each platform.

Fieldwork, conducted between 2024 and 2025, concentrated on TikTok and Vinted, which represent the most widely used platforms in the Campanian context and the most evident spaces where informal digitalization unfolds.

TikTok and Vinted were chosen as contrasting paradigms of platform-mediated informality. TikTok exemplifies hyper-performative and visibility-driven commerce, while Vinted represents a peer-to-peer model structured around discretion, reputational trust, and minimal self-exposure. Vinted's inclusion was motivated by its widespread popularity in the Italian context, with over five million active users according to ISTAT (2022); serving primarily as a comparative and conceptual reference, its distinct governance model, which institutionalizes trust through ratings and standardized transactions offered an analytical value as a counterpoint to TikTok's live-streaming logics.

The study adopts a purposive sampling strategy oriented toward information richness rather than statistical representativeness (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). We proceeded in consecutive phases:

1) Exploratory mapping: Between January 2024 and March 2025, over 300 TikTok profiles associated with streaming commerce in Southern Italy were identified through geo-located and keyword-based searches ("live shopping", "vendita Napoli", "offerte live", "Vinted", "second hand"); over 100 Vinted profiles featuring geolocation and/or explicit references to Southern Italy were mapped. 2) Selection criteria: A) Tiktok: 70 profiles selected on four inclusion criteria: consistent engagement in live selling<sup>1</sup> (minimum 5 live sessions per month); visibility of transactional intent (references to prices, product codes, or payment channels); stable participatory engagement (at least 50–60 active viewers per session); a folkloristic selling style with a strong Campanian cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Livestreams ranged from 15 minutes to 2 hours. For each, we recorded: platform metrics (likes, comments, viewers, followers); verbal and visual cues of transaction (price mention, order confirmation, payment redirection); linguistic style, audience interaction, and identity management.

imprint; B) Vinted: a subset of 40 profiles focused on visual presentation, linguistic style, and forms of informal adaptation such as customized packaging, price negotiation, or off-platform redirection; additional cases observed on TikTok, referring to user experiences with Vinted transactions.

3) From a convenience sample of 110 TikTok streamers, resulted in 17 semi-structured interviews, and one live selling session observed in-person. Interviews explored platform strategies, risk perceptions, audience cultivation, product curation, and adaptive labor practices.

The data were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2012), with analytical categories shaped around performative labor, affective economies, platform governance, and informal adaptive strategies.

Alongside qualitative fieldwork, the study incorporated quantitative indicators extracted directly from platform interfaces (e.g., number of likes, views, followers, comments, and engagement rates). These metrics were used descriptively to contextualize the observed practices, as proxy indicators of both economic viability and social legitimacy. They were used in two ways: 1- Descriptive — to illustrate magnitude and rhythm of engagement (e.g., peak times, visibility spikes, follower growth); 2- Comparative — how visibility works across platforms and support the analysis of ‘adaptive’ and ‘bold’ forms of commerce.

Among limitations to this study, first, access is algorithmically mediated, meaning content visibility is influenced by platform logics that are opaque and non-reproducible. Since TikTok’s recommendation system progressively personalizes content, algorithmic bias was mitigated by using neutral training accounts created with controlled browsing behavior specifically designed for this research. Nevertheless, a selection bias remains: visibility-weighted algorithms tend to privilege the most popular sellers, thereby underrepresenting marginal actors and shaping our dataset according to the algorithmic distortions generated by the researcher’s geographical positioning during algorithm training and content retrieval (Bishop, 2019). This limitation highlights the situated and partial nature of algorithmic visibility, which reflects how platform infrastructures reproduce socio-technical hierarchies and geographic asymmetries in data access (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

Second, observer participation in digital spaces is shaped by platform norms and constraints—such as surveillance, moderation policies, and account thresholds—raising questions of positionality and ethics (Markham, 2013). Third, convenience sampling and voluntary response bias limited interview diversity, potentially excluding more precarious actors wary of engagement. Moreover, content volatility, e.g., deletion of livestreams or ephemeral videos, posed challenges for long-term traceability and longitudinal comparison.

Although purposive sampling ensures depth, it limits generalizability. Gender and age self-declarations were accepted at face value, and the visibility bias toward active sellers may exaggerate performative tendencies relative to the broader population of digital micro-entrepreneurs. In addition to algorithmic and sampling biases, another important limitation concerns gender representation. While age distribution was systematically recorded, gender data were initially noted only qualitatively during observation. Our data see a strong female prevalence, especially among TikTok and Vinted sellers, aligning with European-level studies that associate platform-mediated second-hand trade with feminized consumption and care practices (Huws, 2014). Gendered labor patterns particularly the fusion of domestic, emotional, and commercial roles should thus be seen not as anecdotal, but as structural features of adaptive informality.

## 5. Findings

The empirical investigation reveals that informal digital entrepreneurship in southern Italy takes diverse yet interconnected forms, shaped by gendered practices, domestic environments, and collective strategies of adaptation. Across both TikTok and Vinted, informal sellers reinterpret pre-existing moral economies—grounded in trust, sociability, and affective exchange—through the infrastructures and affordances of digital platforms.

On TikTok, the most frequently sold product categories include cosmetics and personal care items, homeware and linens, clothing and accessories, jewelry and costume pieces, crafts and artworks, vehicles, and, in some cases, counterfeit or uncertified luxury goods. The observed cases can be divided into two main groups: 59% of livestreams originated from digital-only sellers, 41% associated with brick-and-mortar businesses leveraging TikTok to expand their market reach, concluding transactions via WhatsApp or other informal channels.

On Vinted, the most prevalent product categories include clothing, accessories, and household items. Among the forty profiles analyzed, twenty-four (60%) primarily sold mid- to low-range brands (e.g., Terranova, ASOS, Zara, Oysho, Intimissimi), twelve (30%) specialized in vintage or *Made in Italy* products, and the remaining four (10%) offered low-cost accessories and home goods.

The profiles exhibited a pronounced gender imbalance: female users accounted for 73.3% of the sample, while male users represented only 26.7%, which is in line with patterns of platform-mediated consumption, as reported by We Are Social (2025): women under the age of 35 constitute the most active

demographic on platforms such as TikTok and Vinted, underscoring the gendered and generational dynamics that shape second-hand and informal fashion economies.

The study also mapped patterns of economic variability, summed up in *Tab 2* reporting items coded according to the price displayed at the time of the live listing or shown on-screen.

*Tab. 2 Ranges of prices and products*

Price Range (€)	Product Types	Share of Observed Items	Notes
0 – 20	Cosmetics, accessories, low-cost household items, entry-level clothing	53 %	Low-cost, high-volume micro-sales characteristic of TikTok lives and basic Vinted listings.
20 – 100	Clothing, shoes, small electronics, linens, vintage and mid-range brands	39 %	Middle-range goods
100 +	Artisanal crafts, semi-luxury or counterfeit branded items	8 %	Higher-risk or off-platform transactions, mostly observed on TikTok.

Overall, this distribution highlights how informal digital commerce is primarily sustained by low- and mid-value transactions, reflecting accessible entry points for micro-entrepreneurs and the affordability expectations of their audiences. TikTok and Vinted suggest distinct yet complementary modalities of informal digital entrepreneurship, with the difference that TikTok encourages impulse-driven, high-frequency micro-sales through performative engagement, while Vinted favors slower, reputation-based exchanges structured around negotiation and trust.

### *5.1 TikTok sellers*

On TikTok, commerce has become a space for the reproduction of popular culture, where vendors highlight content diversity, product variety, and creative sales tactics. Filming settings vary: in physical shops, lives occur among customers, staff, and inventory; in online-only setups, domestic environments are repurposed into structured display spaces.

The language used is casual and often dialectal, with high attention to consumer queries, including personal questions, creating an intimate seller-consumer rapport. Sellers with fewer followers but high engagement perform

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better in fostering customer loyalty and psychological support, as seen in the case of a 55-year-old creative livestreamer who described her WhatsApp group of 70 women as a space for healing through craft and emotional solidarity: “I created this Whatsapp group, we are about seventy women, most of them are creative, non-creative, depressed women who want to start. I am happy because I really say that this is a therapy, but not just creative sewing, everything is a therapy, everything that has to do with the passion of doing, of creating is all a distraction from a pathology even people who are sick, who are not well and maybe shift their attention to creativity. In this group they ask me for measurements and I send them advice and even private things. [...] a relationship of friendship is created even if we don't know each other” (Female Livestreamer, home accessories artisan, 55 years old).

Some vendors operate on an industrial scale, live-streaming for over 8 hours daily. One observed shop in Naples operated from a large warehouse divided into livestreaming, storage, and packaging areas. We witnessed the organization, start-up and execution of the afternoon live, which involved the use of a total of 4 smartphones, and the cooperation of 6 people (personal shoppers, a model, the owner as presenter and two collaborators).

We estimated profits ranging from 200 to 400 euros per 20-minute session, suggesting earnings of 10-20 euros per minute of live sales. Many sellers build a loyal customer base through registering on WhatsApp and accessing private groups. Trust plays a critical role in sustaining these activities, built through transparency in communication and emotional resonance. “It's hard to earn trust, but once you do, it works. They often tell me that they see honesty, transparency and kindness in my videos”. (Male livestreamer, jewelry shop owner, Bari). A livestreamer artist, owner of an online shop for customizing fashion accessories, says: “the spontaneity, with which I do the live, with which I do the videos, the emotions you transmit through your paintings, the passion you put into them, the determination, [...] The streaming helps a lot, both to build customer loyalty, and to answer all the questions” (Female livestreamer, fashion accessory artist)

Interactions continue beyond the sale: many sellers create private groups on WhatsApp to update customers on news, to warn the community that the live has started and to participate, to establish a confidential and intimate relationship between the community members and the seller. This network of trust and informal branding fosters repeating purchases and co-creates value with the consumer community.

Folkloric styles, characterized by baroque excess and performative storytelling, dominate many livestreams. Sellers often speak in dialect, and recall the theatricality of 1990s TV infomercials, adapted for TikTok. Livestreamers

respond emotionally to viewer fluctuations and rely on community participation to maintain live visibility. These gestures increase the visibility of the live, and contribute to create a sense of belonging and participation in the marketing process, thus co-constructing the economic experience. A significant example occurs when the live is reported, risking being blocked: in these cases, the community reacts as a whole, sending hundreds of green hearts to avoid its interruption.

Most lives occur in the 7–11 PM time slot, including weekends, dissolving the boundary between private and working life. The totalizing nature of this informal digital labor echoes Cingolani's concept of a transformation, in the ends and means, of domestic work. TikTok livestreams analysis revealed engagement peaks of up to 57,000 likes, indicating a high level of participatory rhythm. Followers ranged from TikTok's minimum livestream threshold (1,000) to over 100,000, reflecting varied degrees of seller centrality and influence within platform-specific economies.

A key finding is the widespread presence of counterfeit goods, despite TikTok's official ban on illegal or unregulated commerce. WhatsApp is crucial in the "grey market" zone, where sellers finalize transactions. As stated on the platform's official website: "TikTok is not a place for illegal or unauthorized transactions, including black or grey markets. [...] Counterfeit products, luxury goods, alcohol, etc., are prohibited." They also use Instagram and Facebook creating a multi-platform ecosystem, Instagram serves as a branding tool, while Facebook supports older demographic segments.

## *5.2 Vinted sellers*

To understand the lived experiences and perceived values associated with Vinted, we complemented ethnographic observation with a curated set of user narratives collected through TikTok. In Italy, Vinted's rapid diffusion, over 5 million registered users, representing 10% of online shoppers (ISTAT, 2022), reflects broader trends in collaborative consumption. Compared to TikTok, empirical depth on Vinted is necessarily narrower, as the platform's asynchronous and semi-anonymous nature constrains immersive observation. Nonetheless, its examination provides theoretical contrast, revealing how digital informality operates along a continuum from relational exposure to transactional restraint. On Vinted, consumers act at times as buyers and suppliers; reputational capital, generated through reviews, becomes the cornerstone of the sales process. Informal and creative shipping practices are also becoming common, often driven by the need to cut delivery costs or accommodate logistical constraints (e.g., among university students, or tourists).

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However, over time, Vinted has become the site of a new wave of informality, particularly regarding shipping practices, where humorous anecdotes and documented scams are increasingly frequent, ranging from absurd packaging choices to actual fraud. On the other side, we assist a strategic misuse of buyer complaint tools, where customers falsely claim counterfeit or damaged goods to trigger refunds while retaining the item. Vinted typically requires visual proof in cases of dispute, yet such evidence can be easily manipulated, thereby facilitating fraudulent practices. For example, Wojewoda (2023) explored the creative and evolving methods of fraud used by Vinted users in Poland, revealing how platform-mediated exchange can facilitate criminal behavior.

In contrast to TikTok, where success depends on the seller's performative ability and community-building skills, Vinted's reputation mechanisms rely almost exclusively on transactional linearity: positive reviews stem from a successful sale and timely delivery, making a seller "recommended" over time. Thus recalling the "social acceleration theory" inciting speed-based competition between users, who must now be more responsive, more trend-conscious, and more savvy than others (Juge, Pomiès, & Collin-Lachaud, 2023). Informal strategies for customer retention are also present. For instance, many sellers include small gifts or personalized notes in packages to foster loyalty and emotional reciprocity (Arsel & Dobscha, 2011).

Despite its branding as a platform for sustainable and ethical commerce, Vinted ultimately replicates many of the same unsustainable and informal capitalist mechanisms. Within the contemporary platform economy, "deception" becomes the embodiment of individualistic economic rationality (Ens & Marton, 2021), where the survivalist logic of "making do" is reframed as the ultimate expression of neoliberal subjectivity. Unless collective mindsets and aspirations shift, there will be no meaningful space to critically assess the platform's role as a transformative agent in digital economic or ethical behavior (Parguel, Lunardo & Benoit-Moreau, 2017).

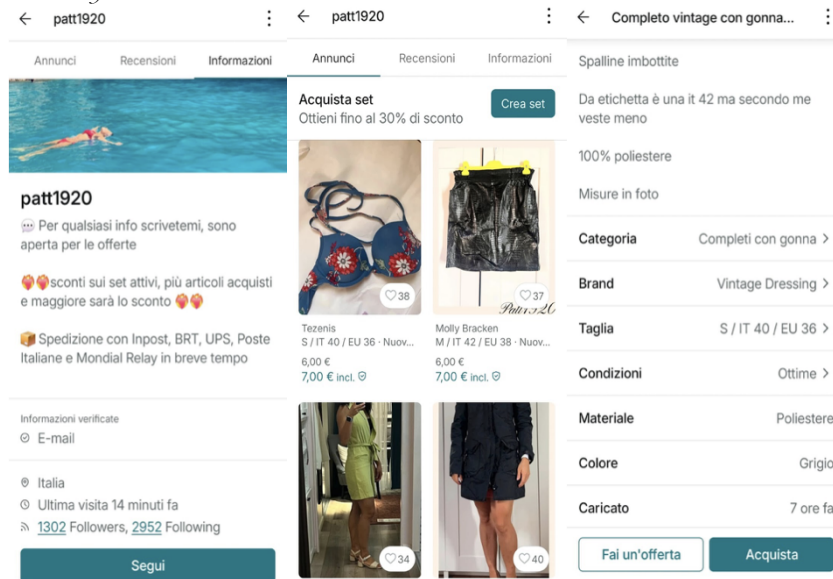
An important feature of this adaptive commerce is the balance between engagement and discretion. Sellers engage with buyers via chat, respond to reviews, and adopt dynamic pricing strategies, demonstrating a level of interaction that exceeds that of street vendors. They oscillate between strategies of visibility and anonymity, identity is strategically managed, choosing nicknames, limiting direct interactions, and building reputations based on user reviews. Unlike street markets, transactions occur in an environment moderated by corporate policies enforcing certain forms of regulation (e.g., traceable payments, buyer protection) and by corporate governance and algorithmic infrastructures, which enforce traceability and standardization (Gillespie, 2018). Nevertheless, users often find ways to circumvent these constraints, for

example by encouraging off-platform transactions to avoid fees and maximize profits. Many users are micro-entrepreneurs who utilize collaborative platforms as storefronts for more stable commercial activity, this suggests a “continuum” between formal and informal markets.

The analysis of Vinted complements the TikTok case by illustrating a contrasting model of platform-mediated informality. On vinted, economic interactions are mediated by reputation systems, asynchronous communication, and traceable transactions, producing a form of institutionalized informality (Arcidiacono & Farinella 2023; Ramella & Manzo 2019), whereas TikTok’s sellers rely on emotional resonance and algorithmic exposure.

In *Figure 1* we present screenshots from a typical Vinted profile, exemplifying the minimalist and reputation-driven aesthetics of semi-formal exchange. In *Figure 2*, we capture examples of TikTok live-stream selling sessions, where performance, and affective engagement become central to value creation.

*Figure 1. Screenshots of a Vinted profile illustrating the aesthetics of discretion and reputational trust for a case study<sup>2</sup>*



<sup>2</sup> Translation: Patt1920 - Informations: For any information, feel free to message me. I'm open to offers. Discounts on active sets. The more items you buy, the bigger the discount. Shipping available with InPost, Bartolini, UPS, Poste Italiane, and Mondial Relay in a short time. / Reviews: Everything was fine, thank you. Perfect delivery, and the dress looks just like in the photos. / Users' reviews: 143 - Automatic reviews: 59.

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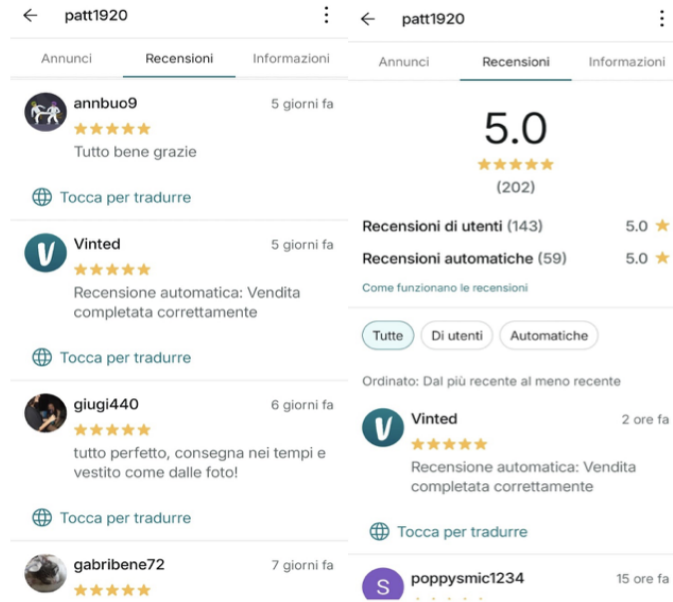
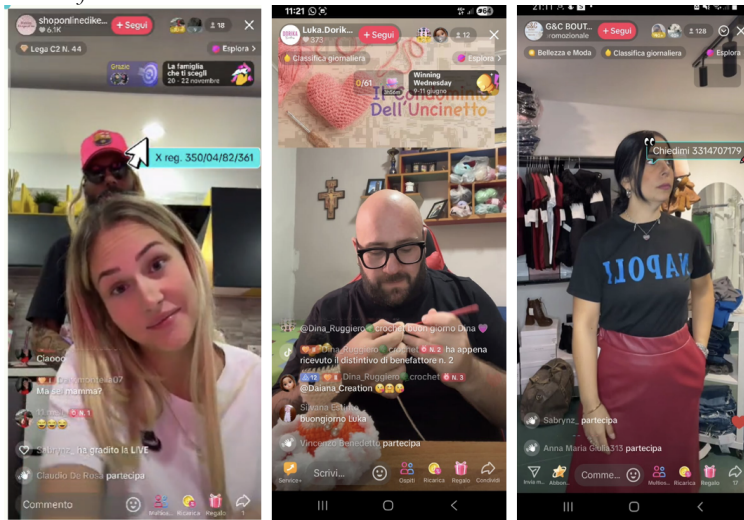


Figure 2. Screenshot from TikTok live-selling sessions showing affective performance and hypervisibility as mechanisms of value creation.



## 6. Discussion: from reluctant to bold digitalization

Informal commerce expands as a dynamic field of experimentation. TikTok is associated with hyper-performativity and emotional labor, while Vinted favors discretion and reputational capital; then desired exposure, audience demographics, and risk tolerance guides sellers in strategically selecting adequate platforms. The data reveal a nuanced landscape of multi-platform selling strategies, particularly on TikTok, where digital trade operates as a form of informal economy defined by personalized interaction, and high community engagement.

The observation of informal commerce on TikTok reveals transformations in digital sales models, discloses an evolution situated at the crossroads of distinct theoretical perspectives. On the one hand, the bazar literature (Deka, 2023) frames informal digital commerce as a reluctant transition, where sellers cautiously enter the digital realm, preserving strategies to evade traceability and maintain anonymity. These vendors often engage with platforms like eBay or Vinted conservatively, employing techniques such as multiple user accounts, cash transactions, and in-person delivery—tactics that reflect a perception of digital technologies as both opportunity and threat to the economic security of informal networks.

On the other hand, Gago's (2017) theory of the baroque economy posits a radically different interpretation: here, visual and narrative excess is not merely an aesthetic by-product, but a structural mechanism of value production.

The analysis of live selling on TikTok operates within this theoretical tension. TikTok embodies the logic of digital exposure, where economic success is tied to the seller's ability to gain engagement, performing identity and intimacy in real time. Livestreams are immersive and emotionally charged spectacles. Sellers must constantly engage, entertain, and expose themselves to sustain attention. Transactions occur in real time, mediated through direct audience engagement. Emotional authenticity performed by TikTok sellers fosters community bonds, in a sort of affective labor (Illouz, 2017; Abidin 2016) where livestreamers must "become" a visible product, an expressive and responsive one.

TikTok's commerce ecosystem is largely informal, overcoming regulated trade. Despite official bans on counterfeit goods and unauthorized sales, enforcement is uneven and easily bypassed (e.g., redirecting transactions to WhatsApp).

In terms of temporality, TikTok commerce unfolds in real-time, demanding constant presence and live responsiveness. Sales are spontaneous, unpredictable, and driven by rhythm and visibility peaks.

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By contrast, Vinted operates under a model of strategic discretion. Sellers remain pseudonymous, identity is optional, and engagement is largely asynchronous. Success is contingent not on personality, but on reputational metrics (positive reviews, fast shipping, low conflict rates). Here, commerce is de-personalized and transactional: listings are impersonal, communication is minimal and asynchronous. Vinted monetizes speed and logistics. Their labor is front-loaded (writing descriptions, uploading photos) and less continuous, and the emotional expenditure is limited. Although technically P2P and non-commercial, many users operate as de facto micro-enterprises.

Vinted represents a more regulated informal space, anyway able to overcome platform governance tools (flagging, buyer protection, shipping tracking), where frauds persist through loopholes in visual documentation and subjective claims.

A comparative synthesis in *Tab. 1* underscores the article’s main theoretical contribution: that informality in the digital era is not a unitary condition but a configurational field, ranging from performative exposure to regulated anonymity. The concepts of adaptive commerce and bold digitalization operate both as analytical lenses for understanding forms of informality. As previously defined, adaptive commerce refers to the strategic modulation of visibility, legality, and relational exposure that allows informal actors to sustain economic participation under conditions of uncertainty, and bold digitalization, by contrast, refers to the performative intensification of this adaptation: when informal actors consciously embrace algorithmic visibility, affective labor, and self-performance as productive assets. Together, these categories delineate a continuum of informal digital practices—from cautious evasion to assertive display—thus offering a transferable typology for comparative research.

*Tab. 1 Comparative table*

Analytical Dimension	TikTok Live Commerce	Vinted Peer-to-Peer Market
Logic of Visibility	Hypervisibility and affective exposure. Sellers transform self-performance into a market asset; economic success depends on algorithmic amplification and audience engagement.	Regulated discretion. Visibility is mediated by user profiles and ratings; anonymity is permissible.
Temporality of Transactions	Synchronous and performative: sales unfold in real time; success depends on immediacy and rhythm.	Asynchronous and cumulative: listings persist over time; delayed communication and reputation accrual.

Governance and Regulation	Loose and opaque governance; rules circumvented via off-platform channels (e.g., WhatsApp). Algorithms regulate visibility.	Structured governance via buyer protection, traceable payments, and standardized dispute mechanisms.
Form of Labor	Affective and emotional labor: sellers perform, entertain, and cultivate audience trust; dependency on engagement metrics.	Transactional and logistical labor: emphasis on listing accuracy, fast shipping, and customer reviews; minimal emotional exposure.
Economic Model	Attention-based economy where content and commerce fuse.	Reputation-based economy; trust and reliability.

The contrast between the two forms of e-commerce reflects a deeper transformation in the relationship between informality and digital technology. Traditional bazaars model presents a form of informal economy in negotiation with digital structures, resistant, cautious, and adaptive. In contrast, TikTok sellers represent a post-cautious, assertive digital informality, where the platform is fully appropriated as an economic infrastructure that reconfigures market rules. This shift from prudence to aggressive utilization signals a paradigmatic evolution, where informality is shaped by digitality and actively shapes it.

However, this evolution entails notable implications. The traditional bazar model provides informal vendors a degree of protection from regulatory scrutiny; the TikTok model exposes them to constant public and algorithmic surveillance, raising the risk of policy intervention. This difference may shape the future trajectories of informal markets, necessitating new adaptive strategies and potentially triggering further transformation in market dynamics.

The case of Naples and Campania is crucial for testing and refining these concepts. This region represents a paradigmatic example of “digital peripherality”, where longstanding informal economies, dense social networks, and a tradition of pragmatic creativity intersect with the global logics of platform capitalism. The area’s economic morphology, from small-scale family businesses, to informal resale, and community-based exchange, provides fertile ground for observing within the paradigm of the local industrious economy (Arvidsson et al, 2025), how digital tools are appropriated from below to reproduce and transform existing market cultures. Moreover, the “southern” model of informality reveals an alternative understanding of risk and regulation. While formal institutions often fail to guarantee stable livelihoods, digital tools enable sellers to navigate uncertainty through collective support networks and cross-platform strategies (particularly the use of WhatsApp for off-platform

transactions). This adaptive pragmatism mirrors the flexible, inventive ethos historically characteristic of southern informal economies.

## 7. Conclusions

Recalling the three axes mentioned in the introduction (conceptual, empirical, contextual), now we propose conclusive reflexions. Along the conceptual axis, the paper has proposed the twin notions of “adaptive commerce” and “bold digitalization” as analytical tools for understanding the current reconfiguration of informal economies. Adaptive commerce captures the flexible and tactical engagement with digital infrastructures that allows informal actors to navigate uncertainty and regulation. Bold digitalization, by contrast, describes a more assertive and speculative turn, where visibility, emotion, and performance become forms of economic capital in themselves. Together, these concepts suggest a shift in perspective: from viewing informality as a deficit or deviation to recognizing it as a generative force, capable of theorizing its own modalities of adaptation.

From an empirical standpoint, the comparison between TikTok and Vinted illustrates two coexisting moral and temporal economies. TikTok’s live-selling ecosystems are built upon immediacy, affective engagement, and algorithmic amplification, whereas Vinted relies on asynchronous trust and reputational capital.

While TikTok presents bottom-up economic opportunities, it is also an opaque, volatile space governed by non-transparent algorithms. As Woodcock & Graham (2020) note, digital labor is often governed by unstable metrics, with monetization tied to views, likes, and engagement, all subject to sudden change. The resulting tension exposes the fragility of economic sustainability in precarious subjects and enforces a constant presence and performativity, demanding emotional labor far beyond commercial competence. Platforms such as Uber and TikTok subsume informal labor into a new regime of value extraction, often lacking any legal protection. They operate as mere digital intermediaries and deepen the crisis of social reproduction by expanding informal work on a large scale.

The intimate textures of everyday life turn into commodifiable content when livestream sellers perform domestic labor, care work, and identity construction simultaneously. Digital capitalism colonizes both time and care, perpetuating the total subsumption of everyday life. The overlap of public and private spheres, largely invisible, intensifies the labor burden and reinforces forms of work that escape formal protections.

Families and small sellers show remarkable adaptive capacity and economic creativity from below, and even the platforms themselves turn out to be more flexible than they seem. They are highly plastic, shaped and fed by grassroots innovation. In fact, critical and oppositional practices are increasingly co-opted, and integrated into corporate frameworks. As Delfanti and Söderberg (2018, p. 4) warn: “Critical cultures and oppositional practices are co-opted, diluted, and transformed to serve institutional goals. We propose that hacking is being hacked.” In this light, bold commerce is a mechanism of incorporation: it expands the boundaries of participation and visibility while simultaneously deepening capitalism’s reach into personal time, and social bonds.

The tactics of rule-bending, regulatory circumvention, and digital affordance exploitation, once acts of economic hacking, are increasingly absorbed and normalized within capitalism’s value extraction machinery. Informal digital economies are laboratories of neoliberal experimentation, where risk is fully individualized and the logic of entrepreneurship is internalized.

About the contextual dimension, fieldwork in Naples and the Campania region further tells how these practices are sustained by dense local networks of kinship, and community trust, indicating that informality’s vitality lies less in technological innovation than in its capacity for social embedding. The experience of Naples and Southern Italy reveals that digitalization at the periphery is a creative and generative process in its own right. Here, “bold” digital practices embody both economic necessity and cultural invention, transforming platform infrastructures through vernacular forms of the art of “*arrangiarsi*”. A Global South theoretical approach helps overcome Eurocentric biases that equate “development” with formal regulation and recognize that economic innovation also arises at the margins, not only in tech hubs, and understand digital assertiveness as creative and strategic resistance.

Speculatively, these findings suggest that informality is a frontier of capitalism, a site where new socio-economic grammars are invented and tested. Informal actors operate as *de facto* innovators, experimenting with alternative ways of organizing visibility, trust, and value. The new informal economy thrives at the margins while reshaping the center, it is at once a space of empowerment and exploitation, creativity and precarity. The future of digital work lies in the ability to weave storytelling, spectacle, and interactivity into a strategic economic practice, epitomized by the bold commerce.

Future research should investigate cross-platform mobility and the long-term sustainability of informal digital livelihoods. A separate study on Vinted and other peer-to-peer platforms will develop this comparative dimension in

depth. Ultimately, the article proposes that adaptive commerce constitutes a defining feature of contemporary capitalism, suggesting a more nuanced understanding of economic creativity from below and inviting renewed dialogue between digital sociology, feminist economics, and urban ethnography.

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