Opinion: Contemporary Social Media Amplifies Traditional Masculinity and Femininity

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Introduction

The Internet was supposed to liberate us from gender stereotypes. Early cyberspace theorists believed that anonymous, text-only environments would dismantle traditional gender binaries (Danet, 1998; Graddol & Swann, 1989; Rodino, 1997). For example, Danet (1998) described how "the typed text provides the mask" in cyberspace, allowing users to perform gender identities divorced from their physical bodies—males masquerading as females, females as males, some exploring gender-neutral personas entirely. Bruckman (1992) termed these environments "identity workshops" where individuals could experiment with gender performance by enacting characters whose gender differed from their offline identities. The prediction was clear: by freeing people from physical markers of gender, the anonymity of textual computer-mediated communication (CMC) would make online performances more fluid and less binary.

Yet empirical research contradicted this optimism. Herring's early work (1993, 2003) demonstrated that Internet users reproduced stereotypical gendered communication patterns: women tended to be more polite and supportive, men more assertive and adversarial across multiple CMC contexts, from listservs to newsgroups. Herring theorized these patterns as reflecting power dynamics that carried over from offline hierarchies (Herring, 2003). Critically, gender remained visible through language use rather than being masked by anonymity, and performances remained overwhelmingly binary rather than fluid.

Even when Web 2.0 platforms later emerged with "nonymous" profile systems that encouraged revealing real identities (Zhao et al., 2008), binary gender differences still persisted. In early 2010, Kapidzic and Herring (2011) analyzed 1,000 synchronous chat messages and 200 user profile photographs from five popular English-language teen chat websites. They found that males used significantly more manipulative acts, while females used significantly more reactive acts—responding and accommodating to others' messages. Males adopted aggressive and flirtatious tones; females displayed markedly friendlier tones. Moreover, 71% of females' photographs presented them in seductive poses (heads tilted, bodies angled, gazes directed upwards and more revealingly dressed), compared to 28% of males, who positioned themselves at farther distances, often looking away, in more covered clothing. Kapidzic and Herring (2011) concluded that "despite changes in technology and purported feminist advances in society over the past 20 years, traditional gender patterns in communication style and self-presentation persist in CMC" (p. 40).

But 2011 was a long time ago. One might expect that as society has progressed and gender attitudes have become more fluid, a new generation of digital natives would break these patterns. Some

early scholars believed that teenagers growing up with these platforms would become more androgynous in their online communication (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005). The platforms themselves have also evolved dramatically, adding algorithmic feeds, ephemeral content, and sophisticated multimodal features that 2011-era chat rooms lacked, in ways that might potentially reduce gender stereotyping. However, more recent evidence contradicts this optimism.

Gender performance, the active construction of a gendered identity through repeated, stylized behavior (Butler, 1990), has not receded in the past few decades. Schwartz et al. (2013) found many differences between men's and women's language in their analysis of over 15 million Facebook status updates—women used more personal pronouns and social references, while men used more impersonal pronouns, articles, quantifiers, and swear words, similar to findings from earlier research. Maximova and Lukyanova (2020) found that women's messages posted to a Facebook community were more positive, supportive, inclusive, and personal, while men's messages were more negative, individualistic, abstract, and political, leading to the conclusion that "both male and female construct their identity using traditional gender stereotypes of masculinity and femininity" (p. 10). And Aydin's (2025) recent analysis of Twitter, Reddit, and WhatsApp discourse showed that although both genders shift styles depending on platform and context, women across platforms used more hedges, apologies, emojis, and mitigation, while men tended toward directness, including bald disagreement. These findings echo Herring's (1993) early findings and reveal "the deeply internalized nature of gendered communicative expectations" (Aydin, 2025, p. 45), despite dramatic changes over time in platform affordances.

A Contemporary Perspective

Research has clearly shown that gender remains salient in shaping communication dynamics on modern platforms. This essay goes further to argue that rather than reducing gender stereotyping, contemporary platforms actually *intensify* it. This occurs through three mechanisms: multimodal amplification, algorithmic reward systems, and strategic compartmentalization. Gender performance has evolved to become increasingly multimodal, adding audio as a third channel. Platform architectures actively amplify gender through algorithmic systems and design features. And permanence combined with reduced anonymity has made gender expression strategic and fragmented across mainstream and anonymous spaces. As a Gen Z user who has grown up wth social media platforms, I have observed firsthand these new ways of making gender performances more stereotypical. This intensification does not reflect natural gender differences or validate traditional roles. Rather, it demonstrates how platform architectures engineer and profit from exaggerated gender performance, often at the expense of Gen Z's authentic expression and safety.

An extreme example is the phenomenon of "Tradwives"—female influencers who monetize traditional femininity while advocating domestic submission (Sykes & Hopner, 2024). The ideology of submission is packaged in a particular aesthetic: aprons, cottagecore, from-scratch cooking, 70s styling with snatched waists. Platforms amplify the feminized aesthetics—the pretty kitchen, the soft lighting, the vintage dress—making patriarchal arrangements algorithmically shareable. The aesthetic does the ideological work. This essay is a call to recognize how traditional

gender performances have evolved in the present era of multimodality and algorithmic amplification—not toward fluidity but toward platform-engineered intensification.

From Dual-Mode to Multimodal Gender Performance

What Kapidzic and Herring (2011) examined was dual-mode communication limited by 2010 technology: text messages combined with static photographs. Their study couldn't capture what contemporary platforms enable—simultaneous performance across textual, visual, and audio channels. These new mechanisms have transformed gender performance from spontaneous chat room interactions into strategically managed, algorithmically amplified presentations.

Instagram stories, TikTok videos, and Snapchat posts combine textual overlays (captions, emojis), visual (photos, filters, composition), and audio selections into synchronized, multimodal compositions. This third dimension—audio—fundamentally transforms gender performance. Males soundtrack their posts with rap and aggressive tracks, whereas females choose "girly pop" songs—Gen Z slang for upbeat, hyper-feminine pop music from artists like Sabrina Carpenter, Olivia Rodrigo, and Taylor Swift that celebrates playful, bubbly femininity. Each mode reinforces the others, creating totalizing gendered presentations more powerful than what text-and-image chatrooms allowed.

An examination of Instagram stories from my own social network reveals how these three channels coordinate to create coherent gendered performances. The patterns are striking.

Figure 1. Male Instagram Story

The screenshot in Figure 1 shows an anonymized Instagram Story demonstrating male communication patterns: alcohol-focused content, an assertive caption without emojis, and a rap music soundtrack.

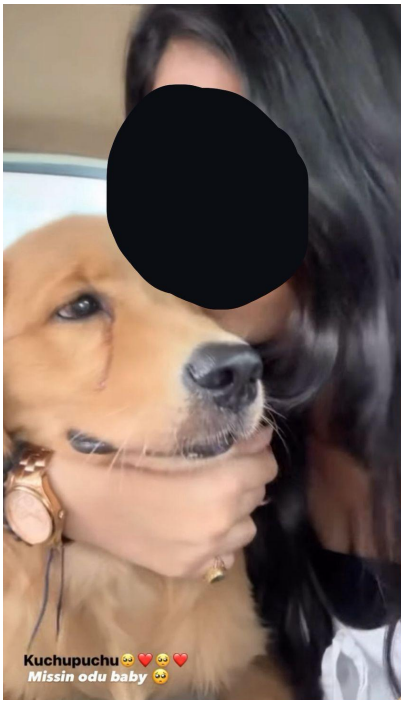

Figure 2. Female Instagram Story

Figure 2 shows an anonymized Instagram Story demonstrating female communication patterns: relationship-focused content, an emoji-heavy affectionate caption, and a "girly pop" music selection.

Male posts follow a common pattern across all three modes. Textually, captions are declarative and philosophical—"stress and martinis"—with zero emojis and minimal emotional context. Visually, content focuses on activities (gym sessions, drinking) shot from farther distances. The audio layer adds a new dimension: music choice. Males typically select rap and aggressive tracks, Drake, Travis Scott, that reinforce the stoic, independent masculine image. Each mode amplifies the others, creating a totalizing performance of emotionally distant assertive masculinity.

Female posts show equally coordinated but opposite patterns. Textually, captions overflow with affection and emojis, "Kuchupuchu 🥹❤️🥹❤️" (a Hindi term of endearment meaning "cutie") or "Missin odu baby,🥹" (a Tamil term meaning "missing my baby"). Visually, content emphasizes relationships (photos with pets, friends) and aesthetics, shot at an intimate or close personal distance. The audio selection completes the gendered performance: "girly pop" tracks from Sabrina Carpenter, Olivia Rodrigo, and Ariana Grande. The music reinforces the imagery of warm, emotionally expressive femininity.

Each mode operates according to common semiotic principles of expressing attitude, emotional valence, and social positioning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), enabling coordinated gender displays that were impossible in text-only or dual-mode platforms. The audio dimension matters because it adds emotional valence that text alone cannot convey. Music signals cultural and generational identity and taste beyond what captions express. More significantly, it operates subconsciously, and the persistence of the patterns suggests deeply internalized gender norms operating across multiple simultaneous channels.

Cultural context intensifies these patterns. In India, where I am from, traditional gender expectations layer onto platform affordances. Women face pressure to appear "Sanskari," which can be roughly translated as being virtuous, docile—qualities that signal marriage-readiness; ultimately leading to the cheerful, emoji-heavy, relationship-focused communication visible across platforms. Men perform "macho" authority through minimal, assertive posts. Online self-presentation affects marriage prospects for women and professional reputation for men, creating more calculated gender performances where stakes are high. When one's real identity is attached, users are not just communicating but curating a gendered persona for social purposes. Multimodal platform design actively shapes and amplifies these gendered patterns.

Platform Architectures Actively Amplify Gender

Contemporary platforms don't merely host gender performances; they actively amplify and monetize them through algorithms, design choices, and economic incentives.

TikTok: Algorithmic Amplification of Gendered Language

TikTok exemplifies how algorithms propagate and intensify gendered patterns. The platform's "girly pop" phenomenon—upbeat, feminine pop music and the associated hyper-feminine Gen Z aesthetic—demonstrates algorithmic amplification in action. With the rise of Gen Z on TikTok, feminized slang terms spread through the platform's recommendation algorithm, creating a feedback loop: users adopt the language, the algorithm rewards it with visibility, and more users adopt it. "Delulu" (short for "delusional") playfully describes holding unrealistic beliefs—often about romance or celebrities—but has evolved to celebrate bold, optimistic confidence in pursuing ambitious dreams. "Brat," popularized by Charli XCX's 2024 album and the viral "Brat Summer" trend, refers to an unapologetically confident, messy feminine aesthetic that embraces imperfection and rejects traditional expectations of polished femininity. "Girl dinner" describes low-effort, snack-based meals that reject traditional cooking expectations, though it has sparked debate about whether it celebrates convenience or normalizes disordered eating. These terms exemplify how algorithms industrialize gendered language.

Women strategically use this accessible, feminized language to counter mansplaining in traditionally male-dominated domains like finance, politics, and technology. The "Inflation explained for the girls" reel perfectly illustrates this dynamic. The creator, a conventionally attractive woman in full makeup, using pink aesthetics and "for the girlies" framing, explains economics by comparing inflation to boys' popularity (comparing demand for a crush to demand

for goods) and Sephora makeup shortages. The video combines educational content with exaggerated feminine performance: makeup, pink styling, feminized language, shopping metaphors. This creates a paradox: Women gain accessibility and reach audiences, but only by performing heightened femininity. The algorithm rewards gendered performance, not neutral explanation. Gender performance becomes the price of platform visibility.

Dating Apps: Visual-Centric Design and Strategic Performance

Dating apps reveal how platform design privileges appearance over discourse-pragmatic aspects of communication. Swipe-based interfaces make visual presentation the primary filter. Users swipe left to reject or right to accept within seconds based purely on appearance, before reading any text or assessing personality. This design choice fundamentally reshapes gender performance.

I recently examined dating app self-presentation of LGBTQIA+ users in India through an online survey (118 responses) and 20 semi-structured interviews with participants ages 18 to 38. The interviews explored how participants curated profile content and how their self-presentation practices differed across platforms. I found striking platform-specific adaptations. Participants, particularly those presenting femininely, including cisgender women and trans women, deliberately adopted "cheekbone angles," tilting their heads to emphasize facial structure, and "feminine poses," exclusively for dating apps such as Bumble, Hinge, Tinder, and Her. Multiple participants reported creating "spicy" photos specifically for dating apps, images that exist nowhere else in their digital presence. This demonstrates conscious understanding that different platforms require different gender performances.

Male participants who used Grindr, a dating app for gay, bi, trans, and queer people, revealed even more explicit compartmentalization. Several maintained two completely separate profiles: a "vanilla" account with face photos and limited sexual information, visible to their broader network, and a "kinky" account with body shots or no face, featuring explicit sexual content under anonymous usernames. Users tend not to have one consistent gender or sexual performance; they maintain multiple profiles, tailored to different audiences, and privacy affordances on the same platforms. Unlike Facebook (designed for connection) or Twitter (designed for conversation), dating apps exist specifically for sexual and romantic marketplace dynamics where visual-first, swipe-based interfaces incentivize exaggerated gender presentation.

Platforms amplify gender performance because it drives engagement, and engagement drives revenue. Three mechanisms enable this. First, platform economics: engagement equals revenue, and exaggerated performance drives engagement. Second, algorithmic echo chambers: recommendation systems reinforce gendered content bubbles. Third, visual-centricity: image-dominant platforms privilege the visual gender cues. The result is platform-specific gender markets with distinct rules and reward structures. TikTok rewards "girly pop" language, Instagram curates aesthetic femininity, dating apps monetize visual displays. Each platform engineers its own economy of gender performance, pushing younger Gen Z users toward platform-specific extreme presentations they don't maintain consistently elsewhere. These calculated performances carry higher stakes because everything is now permanent and searchable.

Searchability, Permanence, and Strategic Compartmentalization

Contemporary platforms are permanent archives tied to legal identities. boyd (2014) identifies four characteristics that distinguish networked publics from physical spaces: persistence (durability of content), visibility (potential audience reach), spreadability (ease of sharing), and searchability (ability to find content). Everything is searchable by employers, universities, and immigration officials; screenshottable and shareable out of context to fuel public shaming; cached even after deletion. This permanence hasn't eliminated gender performance; it has made it calculatedly traditional.

My own experience reveals how surveillance shapes gender presentation. Despite being an active social media user, Instagram ranks lowest in my usage due to conscious self-censorship due to visa concerns as an international student in the US. I avoid political content, controversial opinions, anything that immigration officers might flag. My gender performance becomes more conservative, adhering strictly to a 'safe' feminine presentation rather than experimentation. This strategic navigation reflects what boyd (2014) theorizes as 'context collapse,' being forced to address incompatible audiences simultaneously, from friends to immigration officials, each with different expectations.

The stakes are not hypothetical. In 2023 in India, sixteen-year-old Pranshu Yadav died by suicide after sustained cyberbullying for posting videos of himself wearing makeup and sarees. The gender non-conforming content violated traditional masculinity norms and attracted coordinated harassment campaigns that followed him across platforms. Permanent, searchable content enables sustained targeting that earlier ephemeral platforms couldn't support. When the stakes of authentic gender expression can be fatal, conformity becomes a survival strategy.

The result is a two-tier digital ecosystem. Teens maintain "clean" main accounts on identity-linked platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn, displaying sanitized, traditionally gendered performances. Risky behaviors and gender experimentations migrate to anonymous spaces and burner accounts. Omegle, a video chat platform that matched strangers all around the world anonymously before its 2023 shutdown, concentrated the uninhibited behavior from earlier internet eras; complete anonymity enabled explicit interactions that would never appear on profile-based platforms. Hence, gender performance is fragmented: Mainstream platforms enforce conservative conformity, while anonymous spaces concentrate experimentation and non-conforming expression (see also Hogan, 2025, this volume).

Conclusion

When Kapidzic and Herring (2011) documented persistent gender differences in online communication—males being more assertive and aggressive, females more reactive and friendly—they captured dual-mode performances across text and images. This essay has argued that these patterns have transformed in three fundamental ways.

First, gender performance has evolved to be increasingly multimodal. Contemporary platforms enable orchestrated performances across textual, visual, and audio channels simultaneously. Instagram stories combine captions, photos, and soundtracks that multiply gendered messages: Aggressive rap amplifies masculine stoicism, "girly pop" tracks intensify feminine warmth. This represents an evolution beyond the dual-mode platforms of 2011, adding a dimension that wasn't available to prior scholarship: simultaneous three-channel performance where each mode reinforces the others.

Second, platform architectures actively amplify gender through mechanisms invisible in 2011. TikTok's algorithm industrializes "girly pop" terminology and rewards feminized content. Dating apps monetize gender display through swipe-based interfaces. These platforms don't merely host gender expression—they engineer economies where performance correlates with visibility and success. At the extreme end, Tradwives who profit from promoting domestic submission through aestheticized content exemplify how platforms reward performances that algorithms cannot distinguish from benign lifestyle material, systematically intensifying what earlier studies documented as persistent.

Third, permanence combined with reduced anonymity has made gender performance strategic and fragmented. Patterns from earlier years persist but are transformed from spontaneous interactions into calculated performances for permanent audiences. Users maintain traditional presentations on identified platforms while displacing experimentation to anonymous spaces. This proves that gender differences haven't vanished, but rather that they've compartmentalized into a two-tier ecosystem enforcing conservative conformity on mainstream platforms while concentrating uninhibited expression in anonymous corners.

These findings challenge foundational assumptions about gender and CMC. Early theorists predicted that CMC would liberate users from gender constraints. The evidence, however, shows the opposite in both anonymous and "nonymous" online environments. Permanent records enforce traditional performances on public platforms, and multimodal affordances have not freed users to experiment with gender identity; rather, they have provided sophisticated tools to perform traditional gender across multiple channels. Algorithmic systems amplify exaggerated presentations, not democratic visibility.

Ample research has demonstrated that gender differences persist online. This essay advances the question: How do contemporary platforms actively construct and monetize gender performance? The answer has critical implications for future research. As platforms increasingly incentivize exaggerated, legible gender performances, observed gender differences may reflect platform incentives rather than users' authentic identities or preferences. Without accounting for multimodality, algorithmic amplification, and permanence, scholars risk mistaking engineered performance for naturalized difference. Gender has not disappeared online; it has been optimized, amplified, and strategically managed within systems that profit from its visibility.

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