

Commodifying Femininity: Gender Performativity of Female Host on TikTok Live Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how femininity is commodified on TikTok Live Indonesia through gender performativity, platform monetization, and local patriarchal norms. Focusing on the anonymized case of Miss W, a macro-influencer observed through more than 40 live-streaming sessions from March to May 2025, this qualitative case study combines virtual ethnographic observation and thematic content analysis. The findings show that Miss W repeatedly performs culturally legible femininity through domestic clothing, soft Javanese speech, attentive affective interaction, and participation in TikTok PK battles. These practices do not simply oppose patriarchal femininity; rather, they reconfigure ideals of modesty, gentleness, and domestic womanhood into a socially acceptable frame for sexualized visibility and virtual gift monetization. The study contributes to media and communication scholarship by linking Butlerian gender performativity with platform labor and Indonesian feminist perspectives. It argues that digital sexualization in Indonesia is not merely a global platform effect, but a culturally mediated process shaped by local gender ideologies and algorithmic reward systems.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of live-streaming platforms has intensified debates about the relationship between gender, visibility, and digital labor. TikTok Live enables creators to transform interaction into income through virtual gifts, ranking systems, and algorithmically mediated visibility. Within this environment, the female body is not only represented; it is also organized as an economic resource through repeated forms of appearance, speech, affect, and audience engagement. Prior studies have shown that sexualized media content can shape gender attitudes, normalize objectification, and affect body image among young audiences (Daniels et al., 2020; Perloff, 2014; Ward, 2016). However, the Indonesian case requires closer attention because digital sexualization does not emerge in a cultural vacuum. It interacts with local gender norms that have long constructed ideal womanhood through modesty, gentleness, domesticity, and emotional care.

This study examines the case of Miss W, an anonymized Indonesian TikTok Live macro-influencer whose live-streaming persona combines two seemingly contradictory registers of femininity. On the one hand, she draws on culturally familiar signs of domestic modesty, including the use of a daster, soft Javanese speech, prayers, gratitude, and warm forms of address. On the other hand, her camera framing, bodily display, and participation in nightly PK battles invite audience attention that is often sexualized and monetized through virtual gifts. This combination makes the case analytically important because it shows that sexualization may not simply reject patriarchal norms. Instead, it can operate through those norms by turning culturally accepted femininity into a mechanism of platform visibility and economic reward.

The scholarly problem addressed here lies in the limited integration of three bodies of literature: gender performativity, platform labor, and Indonesian feminist cultural analysis. Butlerian theory explains gender as a citational effect produced through repeated acts within regulatory norms (Butler, 2011), but it does not by itself explain how gender becomes monetized in platform economies. Studies of influencer labor and live-streaming economies explain visibility, affective labor, and monetization (Abidin, 2023; Duffy & Hund, 2019; Woodcock & Johnson, 2019), but they often insufficiently address how local patriarchal norms mediate the form that commodification takes. Indonesian feminist scholarship, particularly on State Ibumism and Javanese womanhood, provides a crucial cultural lens (Blackwood, 2005; Robinson, 2008; Suryakusuma, 2020), yet it has rarely been connected to the everyday mechanics of TikTok Live monetization.

Accordingly, this article asks two research questions. First, how does the gender-oriented performance of Miss W contribute to the commodification of femininity on TikTok Live within Indonesian patriarchal cultural norms? Second, how do visible artifacts of TikTok monetization, including virtual gift patterns, PK battles, and audience responses, shape the interaction between Miss W and her viewers? The article contributes to media, language, and communication studies by showing that digital gender commodification in Indonesia is simultaneously cultural, technological, and economic. Its novelty lies in demonstrating how the ideals of modest, gentle, and domestic femininity can become a legitimizing frame for sexualized platform visibility rather than a simple barrier to it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender performativity and platform labor

Butler's theory of gender performativity provides the main theoretical foundation for this study. Gender, in Butler's formulation, is not a stable inner essence but an effect of repeated acts, gestures, and discourses that acquire social legitimacy through repetition (Butler, 2011). This distinction is important because performativity is not identical to conscious theatrical performance. Gendered acts may appear intentional, but they are also shaped by regulatory norms that define which expressions of femininity are recognizable, desirable, or punishable within a given social context. On TikTok Live, gender performativity becomes visible through recurring patterns of appearance, language, affect, and bodily orientation that make a streamer legible to audiences as feminine.

Nevertheless, Butler's framework needs to be supplemented by platform labor theory because TikTok Live is not merely a symbolic space. It is also an economic infrastructure. Influencer labor depends on visibility, attention, affective attachment, and the capacity to convert audience interaction into monetary value (Abidin, 2023; Duffy & Hund, 2019). Female creators are often required to balance accessibility and vulnerability while maintaining personal branding and emotional resilience (Abidin, 2021). In live-streaming contexts, this work is intensified by real-time interaction, where creators must continuously respond to comments, sustain intimacy, manage harassment, and encourage virtual gifting (Freeman & Wohn, 2020;

Woodcock & Johnson, 2019; Ye, 2021). Thus, femininity becomes not only an identity category but also a form of labor embedded in platform monetization.

Indonesian and Javanese femininity as cultural framework

Applying gender performativity to Indonesia requires attention to local cultural frameworks. Indonesian womanhood has historically been shaped by intertwined discourses of motherhood, domestic responsibility, modesty, and deference to male authority. Suryakusuma's discussion of State Ibuism shows how women under the New Order were ideologically positioned as wives and mothers whose public value was tied to familial and national service (Suryakusuma, 2020). In Javanese cultural discourse, femininity is often associated with refinement, patience, self-control, and the capacity to preserve household harmony (Blackwood, 2005; Robinson, 2008; Sugiarti & Lestari, 2023). These ideals continue to inform the expectations placed on women in contemporary media culture.

The concept of *wanita karta raharja* is useful for understanding how domestic virtue and feminine respectability may function in digital settings. Rather than disappearing in platform culture, such ideals may be rearticulated through live-streaming performances. A female streamer may appear publicly visible and economically active while still drawing on recognizable signs of domestic femininity. This creates a paradox: the same cultural signs that traditionally regulate women's modesty can be mobilized to make sexualized visibility appear familiar, less transgressive, and more acceptable to viewers. This study examines that paradox through the Miss W case.

Live-streaming economies and gendered audience interaction

Live-streaming platforms combine technical affordances, monetization systems, and affective interaction. Features such as live comments, gifts, rankings, and PK battles create a gamified environment in which viewer attention can be immediately converted into economic value (Schlogel, 2024; Xie et al., 2024). TikTok Live therefore rewards creators who can sustain real-time engagement. This system is not neutral. It privileges content and personas that are affectively intense, visually memorable, and responsive to audience demand. Research on live streaming has shown that creators perform emotional labor by cultivating intimacy and loyalty while adapting to platform metrics and viewer expectations (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019; Ye, 2021).

For female creators, this environment is strongly gendered. Sexualized visibility may increase attention, but it also exposes creators to objectifying comments, harassment, and body surveillance (Bernard & Wollast, 2019; Drenten et al., 2020; Gramazio et al., 2021). The analytical challenge is to avoid reducing female creators either to passive victims of exploitation or fully autonomous entrepreneurs. Their practices must instead be understood as situated negotiations within unequal systems of gender, technology, and monetization. This study therefore treats Miss W's live-streaming practice as a case through which cultural femininity, platform logic, and audience participation become mutually entangled.

METHOD

Research design

This study uses a qualitative case study design supported by virtual ethnographic observation and thematic content analysis. A qualitative design is appropriate because the research focuses on meaning-making, repeated performance, and the interaction between cultural norms and platform affordances rather than on statistical generalization. The case study approach enables an in-depth analysis of a single, information-rich case that reveals mechanisms relevant to broader debates on gender commodification in live-streaming platforms (Yin, 2018). The object of analysis is Miss W, a pseudonym assigned to protect the identity of an Indonesian TikTok Live macro-influencer observed during the research period.

Data sources and sampling

The data were collected from publicly accessible TikTok Live sessions during March-May 2025. The observation corpus consisted of more than 40 live-streaming sessions documented in field notes. Miss W was selected through theoretical sampling after the researcher identified several female Indonesian streamers with similar characteristics: regular live-streaming schedules, reliance on virtual gift monetization, use of domestic clothing, Javanese or Indonesian interactional language, and participation in PK sessions. Miss W was selected as the focal case because her streaming pattern was consistent, her audience interaction was substantial, and the observable data provided a complete basis for analyzing the relationship between gender performance and monetization.

Research procedures

Observation focused on four analytical categories. First, visual representation included clothing, makeup, beauty filters, facial expression, posture, and camera framing. Second, verbal interaction included language choice, tone, address terms, prayers, gratitude, and forms of audience acknowledgment. Third, audience response included comment patterns, visible reactions to bodily or affective cues, and moments of virtual gift-giving. Fourth, session structure included the timing, duration, format, and PK battle dynamics. The coding process was inductive and thematic: initial patterns were identified from repeated observations and then interpreted through the theoretical frameworks of performativity, platform labor, and Indonesian gender ideology.

The study analyzes visible artifacts of TikTok's platform logic, not the proprietary algorithm itself. Therefore, references to algorithmic visibility are based on observable indicators such as ranking pressure, PK competition, gift-giving prompts, and recurring content formats. This distinction is methodologically important because external researchers cannot directly access TikTok's internal recommendation system. The analysis therefore remains grounded in observable interactional evidence.

Ethical considerations

The study uses publicly accessible content, but public availability does not remove ethical responsibility. In line with internet research ethics and the principle of contextual integrity, the subject's real name, username, account link, profile image, and direct viewer comments are not disclosed (Marwick et al., 2023). The article describes patterns at an analytical level rather than reproducing identifiable visual details or verbatim comments. No written informed consent was obtained, and this is acknowledged as an ethical and methodological limitation. The purpose of the analysis is not to expose or personally judge the subject, but to examine how platform structures and gender norms shape live-streaming practices. Future studies should consider participatory or consent-based designs that involve creators as research participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Research Question 1

The first finding is that Miss W's femininity is produced through repeated, culturally legible acts rather than through a single visual feature. Across the observed sessions, her performance consistently combined domestic clothing, makeup, beauty filters, soft speech, gratitude, and affective responsiveness. These elements created a persona that was recognizable as gentle, approachable, and caring. The use of Javanese speech and religious or motivational expressions further situated her persona within a culturally familiar register of feminine respectability.

The second finding is that this respectable femininity coexisted with sexualized visibility. The daster functioned as a sign of domestic modesty, but the camera framing and bodily orientation repeatedly turned domestic clothing into a site of visual attention. This does not mean that the body itself is the performance. Rather, the performance emerges from the repeated arrangement of clothing, camera angle, facial expression, voice, interaction, and audience response. Table 1 summarizes the recurring elements observed in Miss W's gender performativity.

Table 1. Miss W's Gender Performativity: Recurring Performances and Patriarchal Femininity Expectations

Category	Recurring observed performance/behaviour	Alignment with patriarchal femininity ideal	Tension or challenge
Visual aesthetics	Skin-brightening beauty filters, consistent makeup, and polished appearance	Strong alignment with mainstream beauty expectations	Limited challenge; reinforces conventional attractiveness
Camera framing and clothing	Daster as domestic attire, combined with framing that repeatedly directs attention to the body	Partial alignment through domestic modesty	Strong tension through sexualized framing
Language and address	Soft Javanese/Indonesian speech, affectionate address terms, prayers, and expressions of gratitude	Strong alignment with gentleness, politeness, and care	Limited challenge; strengthens relational intimacy

Category	Recurring observed performance/behaviour	Alignment with patriarchal femininity ideal	Tension or challenge
Attitude and expression	Friendly, warm, patient, appreciative, and emotionally responsive	Strong alignment with caring feminine expectations	Limited challenge; turns care into affective labor
Vocal tone and modulation	Soft and intimate tone, with heightened modulation after virtual gifts	Partial alignment through softness	Tension appears when vocal intimacy becomes monetized
PK interaction strategy	Use of affectionate address toward male opponents and participation in physically performative challenges	Partial alignment with gender hierarchy and deference	Challenge appears through public competitiveness and monetized visibility

Source: Author, based on virtual ethnographic observation, March-May 2025.

Table 1 shows that Miss W's repeated performance largely aligns with patriarchal femininity ideals, but certain elements introduce tension. Her visual aesthetics, language, and affective demeanor reproduce conventional expectations of feminine beauty, gentleness, and care. However, camera framing, vocal intimacy, and PK participation transform those expectations into mechanisms of visibility and monetization. The key empirical pattern is therefore not a simple opposition between modesty and sexualization. Rather, modesty becomes part of the frame that makes sexualized attention more acceptable within the live-streaming context.

Research Question 2

The second research question concerns the role of platform monetization and audience response. During observed PK sessions, virtual gifts functioned as more than audience appreciation. They operated as visible tokens of competition, status, and affective attachment. Miss W's response to gifts - naming viewers, thanking them, praying for them, and intensifying her vocal warmth - reinforced the sense that giving was personally recognized and socially meaningful. This interactional loop encouraged sustained participation and helped convert emotional intimacy into economic value.

Audience interaction also revealed the gendered risks of platform visibility. Comments frequently focused on appearance and bodily presence rather than on verbal content. Miss W generally maintained composure, continued the PK format, and occasionally ignored or moderated comments that crossed boundaries. This pattern suggests neither total agency nor total victimhood. Instead, it shows situated adaptation within an environment where visibility and income depend on tolerating, managing, and redirecting gendered attention.

Discussion

The findings extend Butler's theory of performativity by showing how repeated gendered acts become economically consequential within live-streaming platforms. Miss W's femininity is not simply expressed; it is stabilized through daily repetition and recognized by audiences through culturally familiar signs. However, the TikTok Live environment adds a crucial economic layer. Repetition is not only discursive but also monetized. Each act of softness, gratitude, intimacy, and bodily visibility is embedded in a platform environment that rewards attention with ranking, gifts, and continued visibility.

The study also refines platform labor scholarship by demonstrating the importance of local cultural mediation. Prior work on influencers emphasizes visibility, vulnerability, authenticity, and affective labor (Abidin, 2021, 2023; Duffy & Hund, 2019). The Miss W case shows that these processes do not operate uniformly across cultures. In Indonesia, signs of domestic womanhood and Javanese modesty can function as cultural resources that legitimize the display of sexualized visibility. This finding complicates the assumption that sexualization always works by rejecting traditional femininity. In this case, sexualization becomes effective precisely because it is wrapped in recognizable signs of traditional femininity.

The findings further contribute to Indonesian feminist media scholarship. State Ibaism and Javanese femininity do not simply remain as historical ideologies. They are reactivated in digital form when women perform gentleness, gratitude, domesticity, and emotional care for platform audiences. Yet the result is

ambivalent. On the one hand, Miss W's platform activity may produce income, visibility, and a degree of public agency. On the other hand, the route to such agency is shaped by gendered expectations that require emotional availability, bodily presentation, and tolerance of objectifying attention. The case therefore illustrates a paradox of platform capitalism: women may gain economic opportunity through the same gender norms that limit them.

This interpretation does not claim to know Miss W's private intentions. Without direct interviews, her motivations cannot be empirically verified. What can be analyzed is the observable pattern: culturally resonant femininity, audience recognition, PK competition, virtual gifting, and algorithmically visible interaction appear together in a recurring structure. This structure shows how platform monetization can transform gender norms into economic signals. The broader implication is that research on digital gender equality must examine not only representation, but also the platform mechanisms that make certain forms of gendered representation more profitable than others.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that Miss W's TikTok Live persona commodifies femininity by combining culturally familiar signs of Indonesian and Javanese womanhood with the monetization mechanisms of live-streaming platforms. Her use of domestic clothing, soft speech, affectionate address, gratitude, and emotional responsiveness constructs a respectable feminine persona, while camera framing, PK battles, and virtual gifts turn that persona into an economic resource. The central finding is that traditional modesty does not necessarily prevent sexualization. In this case, it helps legitimize and soften sexualized visibility within a culturally recognizable frame.

The study contributes theoretically by linking gender performativity, platform labor, and Indonesian feminist cultural analysis. It also contributes methodologically by demonstrating how virtual ethnographic observation can identify visible artifacts of platform logic without claiming direct access to proprietary algorithms. Practically, the findings suggest that discussions of gender equality in digital spaces must attend to the design of monetization systems, not only to individual creator choices. The study is limited by its single-case design, the absence of interviews with Miss W and her audience, and the lack of written informed consent. Future research should use comparative case studies, creator interviews, and participatory ethical protocols to examine how women negotiate visibility, agency, and risk across different live-streaming contexts.

DECLARATIONS

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The observational field notes supporting this study are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions related to anonymity, contextual integrity, and the risk of re-identification.

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