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Algorithmic Belonging: How Communities Convert Metrics Into Value In Global South Social Commerce

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Abstract
This article theorizes the work of algorithmic belonging in social commerce ecosystems, showing how consumers and micro-entrepreneurs convert community belonging into legibility for recommendation systems and, through them, into symbolic-economic value. Anchored in the interpretivist tradition of CCT, the study combines multi-sited netnography and digital ethnography in Brazil's Northeast (11 months), integrating prolonged observation of live streams and transmediatic flows, 47 in-depth interviews, and elicited materials (decision diaries, digital traces). The findings specify an integrated typology of tactics - signaling rituals, visibility pacts (pods, raids, duets), calculated authenticity, curations of social proof, and community backstages - and formalize the mechanism belonging → visibility → credibility → price. We introduce the construct algorithmic capital (a situated capacity to trigger favourable distributions of attention) and describe regimes of symbolic–algorithmic pricing anchored in public metrics, staged singularity, and moral grammars of "fair value." We evidence ambivalences: collective learning and "visibility insurance" coexist with aesthetic homogenization, intensified aspirational labour, and unpaid presumption - with Global South specificities. Theoretically, we integrate community/belonging with platformization/datafication, repositioning metrics and interfaces as co-authors of identities, bonds, and prices. Managerially, we discuss functional transparency and the management of circulation (beyond "content"). Socially, we propose algorithmic literacy and ethical safeguards for social proof. We thus offer a mid-range framework to understand how the common is performed under algorithmic governance.

Keywords: *Consumer Culture Theory; social commerce; algorithmic belonging; algorithmic capital; Global South.*

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I. Introduction

Over the past two decades, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) has consolidated as an interpretive programme dedicated to understanding how consumers construct meanings, identities, and market relations in specific sociocultural contexts (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Contemporary consumption, however, has been profoundly reconfigured by the platformization of social and market practices, whereby everyday interactions are mediated by programmable digital architectures, recommendation systems, and attention metrics (Helmond, 2015; van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018).

This process introduces a regime of datafication of everyday life, in which individuals' behavioural traces become inputs for algorithmic modelling that influence what is visible, recommendable, and valued in the market (Milan & Treré, 2019; Zuboff, 2019). In this context, *algorithmic imaginaries* emerge - lay conceptions about how algorithms work and what they intend - which guide consumers' and micro-entrepreneurs' decisions and practices on social commerce platforms (Bucher, 2017; Beer, 2017).

Seeking to maximize visibility and engagement, these actors develop routines and strategies grounded in beliefs about "what the algorithm wants," such as ideal posting frequency and timing, content formats "likely to go viral," and community alliances that amplify reach. These practices reconfigure classic dynamics of brand communities and consumer tribes, whose cohesion formerly rested predominantly on symbolic meanings and affective ties (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Cova & Cova, 2002; Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009), but now increasingly depend on opaque architectures of ranking and recommendation.

Simultaneously, the logic of social commerce intensifies the commodification of the self, expanding the notion of the extended self to a digital environment in which possessions, performances, and distributed memories constitute consumer identity (Belk, 2013). Self-promotion and microcelebrity practices become part of the repertoire for building symbolic and commercial value, but also introduce tensions among authenticity, calculability, and belonging (Rokka & Canniford, 2016). While this environment promises opportunities for economic mobility, it often involves unpaid aspirational labour, resulting in precaritization and the fusion of consumption and production - or *presumption* - of data and attention (Duffy, 2017; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010).

Despite its global reach, much of the literature on algorithmic consumption has been produced from Global North contexts. Recent studies of datafication from the South, however, indicate that platforms operate amid historical, infrastructural, and regulatory asymmetries that distinctively shape the agency of consumers and micro-entrepreneurs (Milan & Treré, 2019; Arora, 2016). In Brazil, ethnographies of urban peripheries show that digital tools such as WhatsApp act as moral and economic infrastructures, influencing processes of inclusion, information circulation, and income generation (Nemer, 2022). Heeding this call for empirical pluralization, forcefully articulated by Askegaard and Linnet (2011), is essential for updating CCT's critical agenda, which demands investigations anchored in the "context of context."

Against this backdrop, we address the following central question: how do the lay theories about algorithms (*algorithmic imaginaries*) formed by consumers and micro-entrepreneurs shape their identity projects, community practices, and market tactics within Global South social commerce ecosystems? We pursue three research questions: (1) how do consumers and micro-entrepreneurs construct algorithmic imaginaries about the platforms on which they operate? (2) how do these beliefs guide practices of value creation, belonging, and visibility? and (3) how are such processes traversed by precarities and inequalities characteristic of the Global South?

Our objective is to theorize the *work of algorithmic belonging* as a cultural process through which social commerce actors negotiate visibility, reputation, and income under platform governance, articulating identity, community, and symbolic-commercial value. The article contributes in three ways. First, it proposes a new construct - the work of algorithmic belonging - that connects algorithmic imaginaries, belonging practices, and platformization regimes, addressing gaps in the literature that treat these phenomena in isolation (Bucher, 2017; Beer, 2017; Helmond, 2015).

Second, it integrates debates on brand communities and consumer tribes with discussions of datafication and algorithmic governance, showing how affective ties and collective solidarities become mediated by metrics and algorithms (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Cova & Cova, 2002; van Dijck et al., 2018). Third, it situates the analysis in the Global South, responding to calls for de-westernized perspectives and greater empirical diversity in CCT (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011; Milan & Treré, 2019).

Given the processual and situated nature of this contribution, we adopt a qualitative interpretive approach combining netnography (Kozinets, 2002), in-depth interviews, and analysis of digital traces. This strategy enables us to capture cultural meanings, community dynamics, and infrastructural constraints that shape participants' experiences.

Following this introduction, the article proceeds with (1) a theoretical framework integrating algorithmic imaginaries, belonging, community, and platformization; (2) the empirical context and methods; (3) empirical findings, offering a typology of algorithmic-belonging tactics and regimes of symbolic–algorithmic pricing; (4) theorization of the proposed construct and sensitizing propositions; and (5) theoretical, managerial, and social implications, followed by limitations and directions for future research.

II. Theoretical Framework

CCT and the Shift to Platformized Ecosystems

CCT describes consumption as situated cultural practice, traversed by identity projects, market ideologies, and consumer cultures (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This interpretive programme privileges thick descriptions of how actors construct meanings and belonging in everyday life, articulating micro-practices and macro-structures (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). The increasing mediation of consumption by digital platforms, however, introduces sociotechnical layers (metrics, programmable interfaces, and recommendation systems) that reconfigure the conditions of possibility for the processes described by CCT, displacing part of agency to opaque infrastructures of classification and ranking (Helmond, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018).

In this arrangement, what "counts" as legitimate identity and recognized value increasingly passes through algorithmic visibility criteria and data capture logics (Milan & Treré, 2019; Zuboff, 2019). Updating CCT's framework thus requires integrating the infrastructural dimension - platform governance and datafication - into classic notions of identity projects and market cultures, while preserving attention to the "context of context" (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011; van Dijck et al., 2018; Milan & Treré, 2019).

Platformization, Datafication, and Algorithmic Governance of Consumption

Platformization describes the transformation of social practices into interoperable flows governed by APIs, metrics, and recommendation logics (Helmond, 2015). On platforms, visibility - the condition for symbolic and economic circulation - is mediated by algorithms that distribute attention dynamically, fuelled by engagement signals (van Dijck et al., 2018). Datafication, in turn, converts interactions into data enabling the prediction and modulation of behaviours, reorganizing the relation between consumer autonomy and market control (Milan & Treré, 2019; Zuboff, 2019).

These processes bring consumption and production closer through *prosumption*, in which users simultaneously generate content and monetizable value for platforms and brands (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), often under regimes of aspirational and intermittent labour (Duffy, 2017). In Global South contexts, infrastructural and regulatory asymmetries intensify vulnerabilities, conditioning repertoires of action and visibility (Arora, 2016; Milan & Treré, 2019).

For CCT, this implies that the "field of forces" within which identities and communities are performed now includes an algorithmic regulatory layer that co-determines what emerges, circulates, and stabilizes as value (Helmond, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018; Zuboff, 2019).

Algorithmic Imaginaries as Interpretive Practice and Guide for Action

If algorithms modulate visibility, consumers and micro-entrepreneurs mobilize lay interpretations - the so-called *algorithmic imaginaries* - to decipher "what the algorithm wants" and thereby guide tactics of posting, formats, and sociabilities (Bucher, 2017; Beer, 2017). These imaginaries are not isolated beliefs: they operate as culturally shared heuristics that anchor routines and justify choices, functioning as practical grammars for navigating uncertainty generated by algorithmic opacity (Bucher, 2017; Beer, 2017).

At the same time, they produce new moralities of performance (for example, the idea that "calculated authenticity" pays) which entwine expressive values and metrics within a single regime of legitimation (Belk, 2013; Rokka & Canniford, 2016). Methodologically and epistemologically, CCT suggests approaching these imaginaries as performative cultural artefacts, whose efficacy is observable in recurrent practices, native discourses, and the coordination effects they generate (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). In short, imagining the algorithm is constitutive of doing consumption on platforms; it is a practical sense that "links" identities, communities, and markets under digital governance (Bucher, 2017; Beer, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Belonging and Community under Metrics of Visibility

Research on brand communities and consumer tribes has shown how rituals, narratives, and traditions sustain belongings that exceed transactional ties (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Cova & Cova, 2002). These collectives co-produce value through practices - social networking, community engagement, brand use, impression management - with effects on loyalty, knowledge, and cultural capital (Schau et al., 2009).

With platformization, such practices are mediated by metric systems and recommendation rules: community cohesion and member legitimacy also depend on the capacity to mobilize distributed engagement, likes, and shares (Zaglia, 2013; van Dijck et al., 2018). This does not eliminate affect but reroutes it through a calculable circuit in which reputations and belongings become legible via public, quantified traces (Belk, 2013).

At the same time, aesthetics and performances (selfies, microcelebrity, visual curations) destabilize brand assemblages and shift the axis of authenticity to a hybrid game of sincerity and calculation that rearticulates the common (Rokka & Canniford, 2016; Belk, 2013; Schau et al., 2009). The consequence is a "metric" community in which symbolic reciprocity coexists with grammars of visibility and belonging is continuously assessed by quantifiable signals (Zaglia, 2013; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Conceptual Integration: The "Work of Algorithmic Belonging"

Field materials indicate that the pursuit of visibility on platforms is not limited to isolated actions but emerges as collective, relational work that entwines interpretations of algorithms, community pacts, and performances calibrated for multiple audiences. We term this assemblage the *work of algorithmic belonging* - a cultural process through which social commerce actors convert belonging into legibility for recommendation systems, and this legibility into symbolic-economic value (Helmond, 2015; Bucher, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018).

This work articulates three mutually imbricated dimensions. The first is interpretive, visible in everyday efforts to decipher "what the algorithm wants" and transform uncertainty into practical routines, defining posting cadences, choosing visual hooks, and timing the first minutes of interaction (Bucher, 2017; Beer, 2017). The second is relational–community-based, expressed in cooperation rituals that translate belonging into quantifiable signals, warm-up groups, duets, raids, and other visibility pacts that render attention a collective good (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009; Zaglia, 2013). The third is performative, in which identities and brands are styled as extended selves legible to metrics and recognizable to audiences, continually negotiating authenticity and calculation (Belk, 2013; Rokka & Canniford, 2016).

Under platform governance, these dimensions operate in a circuit: interpretations inform performances; performances seek community recognition; and the community, by validating what "works," feeds interpretations back, stabilizing repertoires. This circuit is traversed by structural asymmetries (financial, infrastructural, regulatory) particularly salient in Global South contexts (Arora, 2016; Milan & Treré, 2019).

We therefore advance the following sensitizing propositions to guide analysis:

- **P1 — Opacity heuristics:** The greater the perceived algorithmic opacity, the more salient the shared imaginaries and the higher the likelihood of routinized signaling rituals (Bucher, 2017; Beer, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018).
- **P2 — Metric belonging:** In highly metrified environments, community legitimacy tends to incorporate public indicators (e.g., engagement, "reach"), realigning inclusion/exclusion boundaries (Schau et al., 2009; Zaglia, 2013; Belk, 2013).
- **P3 — Calculated authenticity:** Tensions between authenticity and calculation produce hybrid performative styles that optimize algorithmic legibility without abandoning signals of singularity (Rokka & Canniford, 2016; Belk, 2013).
- **P4 — Conversion of social capital into attention:** Community pacts and rituals operate as mechanisms converting social capital into attention capital, mediated by platform infrastructure (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009; van Dijck et al., 2018).
- **P5 — Peripheral conditions and volatility:** In Global South peripheral contexts, visibility volatility and algorithmic dependence are greater, raising the costs of belonging work and risks of precaritization (Arora, 2016; Milan & Treré, 2019; Duffy, 2017).
- **P6 — Prosumption and value capture:** The intensification of prosumption widens the gap between value produced by actors and value appropriated by the platform, generating ethical and strategic dilemmas (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Zuboff, 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Boundary Conditions and Scope in the Global South

The efficacy of algorithmic belonging work depends on material and symbolic conditions anchored in socioeconomic and technical contexts. In the Global South, inequalities in access, digital literacy, and labour precarity co-define feasible repertoires and limits to mobility via social commerce (Arora, 2016; Nemer, 2022). CCT recommends anchoring such processes in the local cultural ecology (kinship networks, moralities of mutual aid, informal economies) to avoid universalization (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). Datafication may also reproduce asymmetries, as the conversion of interactions into data serves business models centred on attention extraction, redistributing risks to the margins (Milan & Treré, 2019; Zuboff, 2019).

Analyses should thus consider sustainability thresholds (e.g., time and equipment costs) and informational vulnerabilities (e.g., dependence on rumours about "new algorithm rules"), which shape expectations, disappointments, and engagement cycles (Duffy, 2017; Bucher, 2017; Nemer, 2022). Situating findings in the "context of context" enables theorization sensitive to local institutions, infrastructures, and histories, preserving CCT's interpretive vocation while expanding its explanatory power (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011; Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

III. Empirical Context And Method

Field Delimitation: Social Commerce in Brazil's Northeast

We investigated social commerce ecosystems in capitals and mid-sized cities in Brazil's Northeast, focusing on peripheral and central circuits articulated by Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp groups. Over 11 months (Oct/2024–Aug/2025), we followed daily flows of sales live streams, short videos, story-based catalogues, and community engagement campaigns. This empirical choice follows the principle of situating consumption practices in the "context of context," connecting local routines to broader sociotechnical structures (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011).

In line with debates on platformization and datafication, we observed how metrics and recommendation systems modulated visibility and value circulation (Helmond, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018), and how infrastructural and regulatory asymmetries typical of Global South countries configured repertoires of action and risk (Arora, 2016; Milan & Treré, 2019). In Brazil, such platforms function as moral and economic infrastructures for peripheral publics, a pattern corroborated by recent ethnographies (Nemer, 2022) and widely observed in the field.

Epistemological Orientation and Research Design

The study is anchored in the interpretivist tradition of CCT, conceiving consumption as situated cultural practice and knowledge as dialogical, reflexive co-construction among researcher, participants, and context (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Askegaard & Linnet, 2011).

We adopted an abductive, iterative design: fieldwork and theory continually informed each other, with concepts specified in light of findings and findings interrogated through competing lenses (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012; Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Interpretation relied on the hermeneutic circle and thick description to articulate actions, native discourses, artefacts, and infrastructures (Thompson, 1997; Geertz, 1973).

Strategy: Multi-sited Netnography and Digital Ethnography

We combined multi-sited netnography with digital ethnography. We followed profiles, hashtags, live streams, and derivative communities, conducting participant observation and collecting digital traces (Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets, 2015). A multi-sited approach enabled us to follow circulations across arenas (from feed to live; from live to WhatsApp groups), prioritizing connections over isolated localities (Marcus, 1995).

To address ephemerality and algorithmic modulation, we recorded screens, kept digital diaries, and temporally tracked public metrics (Pink et al., 2016; van Dijck et al., 2018). In total, we observed ≈200 lives (≈300 hours), archived ≈1,500 posts, and collected ≈24,000 comments across campaign cycles (launches, seasonal dates) and weekly routines.

Sampling: Theoretical Logic and Positional Diversity

Theoretical, purposive sampling sought positional variation (Patton, 2002; Charmaz, 2014). We interviewed 47 participants: 28 micro-entrepreneurs (fashion, beauty, food, services) with distinct digital maturities; 14 consumers engaged in brand communities and shopping lives; and 5 community intermediaries (moderators, admins, hosts). Theoretical sufficiency emerged around the 41st interview; additional interviews explored negative cases and probed category boundaries (Charmaz, 2014; Spiggle, 1994).

Sources and Procedures

Observation and digital traces: we systematically recorded (i) events (engagement spikes, challenges, collabs); (ii) practices (signaling rituals, calls-to-engagement, duets, raids); (iii) discourses (captions, stories, comments); and (iv) public metrics (views, likes, shares). Temporal sequences—delivery windows, reach curves, "break" moments—were crucial to interpret practical effects of imaginaries about "what the algorithm wants" (Kozinets, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018).

In-depth interviews: we conducted 47 interviews (60–90 minutes; in-person/remote) using semi-structured guides eliciting algorithmic imaginaries, belonging tactics, and moral economies. We used visual elicitation (co-analysis of participants' posts/lives) to anchor interpretations in native materials (Pink et al., 2016; Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994).

Diaries and elicited materials: nine micro-entrepreneurs kept decision diaries during critical cycles (launch/seasonal peaks), recording algorithmic expectations, choices, and perceived outcomes. These materials reinforced triangulation of sources and temporalities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Analysis: Hermeneutics, Abduction, and Theoretical Integration

Analysis unfolded in three moves. First, we produced live and descriptive codes on notes and transcripts (Charmaz, 2014). Second, we used constant comparison and memoing to focus categories (e.g., "legibility signals," "visibility pacts," "calculated authenticity") making explicit conditions, strategies, and consequences (Spiggle, 1994; Thompson, 1997).

Third, we pursued an abductive trail that tested competing readings (e.g., brand community vs. tribal marketing) until reaching integrations with stronger explanatory power (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012; Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The product was the formal specification of the *work of algorithmic belonging* and propositions articulating its interpretive, relational, and performative dimensions with platformization and datafication (Helmond, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018).

To ensure analytic quality, we maintained an audit trail with dated versions of codes and memos; sought negative cases; and conducted peer debriefings with experienced CCT/qualitative scholars (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). Emphasis fell on interpretive density consistent with CCT's tradition (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Quality Criteria and Interpretive Trustworthiness

We evaluated the study according to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility derived from prolonged engagement, triangulation of sources/times, and interpretive feedback with participants in two return workshops (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994; Charmaz, 2014). Transferability was supported by thick descriptions of contexts, cases, and sequences, enabling judgements of applicability to analogous settings (Geertz, 1973). Dependability rested on thorough documentation of decisions and iterations. Confirmability stemmed from systematic reflexivity (researcher diaries, positionality statements) and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Thompson, 1997).

Ethics in Connective Environments

We followed online-research ethics guidelines: respect for privacy expectations, harm minimization, use of pseudonyms and anonymization of visual identifiers, and informed consent in live streams and closed groups, given researcher–participant asymmetries (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). We avoided reproducing

posts and stories in full; we paraphrased sensitive content and used pixelation when necessary. Procedures align with recognized standards in netnography and digital ethnography (Kozinets, 2015; Pink et al., 2016).

Limitations and Scope of Validity

Changing rules and algorithmic opacity varied over the field period, challenging stable inferences. The longitudinal design and attention to micro-temporalities mitigated some effects, privileging perceived practical effects rather than technical reverse engineering (Helmond, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018). We recognize researcher presence reconfigured some interactions; we alternated observation modes (silent/participant) and recorded positionality to render influence auditable (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994). We do not seek statistical generalization; we offer theoretical and analytical contributions transferable to comparable contexts (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

IV. Findings

Typology of Algorithmic-Belonging Tactics

Longitudinal analysis revealed a recurring repertoire of algorithmic-belonging tactics—practical–symbolic arrangements through which actors attempt to convert algorithmic legibility into public visibility and, in turn, visibility into community reputation. We observed five families: (T1) algorithmic signaling rituals; (T2) visibility pacts (reciprocity pods, raids, duets); (T3) performances of calculated authenticity; (T4) curations of social proof (testimonials, reviews, "before–after"); and (T5) community backstages (coordination via messengers, posting agreements).

These tactics are anchored in imaginaries about "what the algorithm wants" (Bucher, 2017; Beer, 2017), but operate within platformized ecologies that metrify interactions and distribute attention contingently (Helmond, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018). They also reconfigure classical grammars of community/tribe and value creation (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Cova & Cova, 2002; Schau et al., 2009) by shifting part of cohesion to quantified indicators and circulation signals (Belk, 2013; Zaglia, 2013; Rokka & Canniford, 2016). We develop (T1) in depth below; remaining topics follow sequentially.

Algorithmic Signaling Rituals

Across the field, sellers and consumers organized expressive and commercial life around *algorithmic signaling rituals*: small, repeated choreographies that simultaneously express belonging and address system opacity. These rituals echo *algorithmic imaginaries* (lay yet socially shared interpretations of "what the algorithm wants") and function as heuristics for action under uncertainty (Bucher, 2017; Beer, 2017). In platforms that metrify interactions and distribute attention via moving rules, ritualization converts diffuse beliefs into observable routines, re-enacted daily in passages across stories, feeds, lives, and messenger groups (Helmond, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Temporality is central. Participants spoke of "hot windows," "delivery drag," and "the first minutes," organizing almost liturgical cadences: warm-up stories, a hook fixed within the first seconds of the video, opening the live by prompting comments and saves, then triggering cross-reposts. This cadence moralizes discipline ("those who post right deserve delivery") and reinforces community ties, as regularity is read as commitment to the group (Bucher, 2017; Schau et al., 2009). By turning time into virtue, actors translate algorithmic uncertainty into an ethic of effort in which constancy and punctuality are legitimate markers of belonging (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Cova & Cova, 2002).

Beyond timing, recognizable forms of legibility stabilized: openings with explicit promise in 3–5 seconds, "scannable" captions, calculated use of trending tracks, and hashtag mixes combining niche and broad. This legibility aesthetic does not come from official manuals; it emerges from backstage circulation of recipes (DMs, WhatsApp), where veterans "teach the path" and novices replicate templates with small variations. Rituals thus operate as social technologies of learning: by copying what "worked," the collective consolidates patterns that communicate value to humans while signalling intelligibility to recommendation systems (Rokka & Canniford, 2016; Belk, 2013; Helmond, 2015).

Initial engagement is decisive. The belief that the algorithm "tests" content in micro-samples sustains warm-up practices: backstage agreements for an initial "push" (immediate comments, saves, poll answers) interpreted as a rite of passage into widened circulation. In the community grammar, "pulling delivery" becomes a proof of loyalty and reciprocity, redefining belonging as the capacity to mobilize public signals (Schau et al., 2009; van Dijck et al., 2018; Belk, 2013). From a CCT perspective, affective ties and shared narratives remain important, but legitimacy also becomes metric, assessed by quantified traces that render the common auditable (Zaglia, 2013).

In the Global South, specific contours emerge. In peripheral neighbourhoods of Brazil's Northeast - where infrastructural intermittency and income volatility heighten the cost of attention - rituals operate as collaborative insurance: when algorithmic distribution falters, the group triggers cadences and warm-ups to

"push" delivery, offsetting technical fragilities and reducing individual risk (Arora, 2016; Milan & Treré, 2019; Nemer, 2022).

Less technically endowed entrepreneurs adopt templates as cognitive shortcuts; more mature actors experiment with micro-variations of timing and sequence. In both cases, the ritual repertoire is situated - translated locally via moralities of mutual aid and reputation, coherent with relational ecologies of popular markets (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Ambivalences abound: positively, rituals accelerate learning, reduce uncertainty, and increase predictability of minimum results - especially valuable for novices. Negatively, we observe aesthetic hyper-conformity (repeated openings and editing patterns) and temporal overload: "working for the metric" entails replying within minutes, posting at prescribed times, and monitoring signals, expanding what the literature describes as aspirational labour and unpaid prosumption (Duffy, 2017; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Identities become calibrated performances—a "calculated authenticity" seeking balance between singularity and algorithmic legibility (Rokka & Canniford, 2016; Belk, 2013).

Theoretically, three inferences emerge. First, perceived opacity increases ritualization: the less intelligible the rule, the more collectives stabilize public heuristics for coordinating action (Bucher, 2017; Beer, 2017). Second, belonging acquires a metric layer: participating in warm-ups and cadences becomes a practical criterion for recognition and access to future cooperation (Schau et al., 2009; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Belk, 2013). Third, a visibility–differentiation trade-off appears: adopting "delivering" formulas raises average reach but flattens styles and shifts authenticity to an aesthetic negotiation where being credible also means being legible (Rokka & Canniford, 2016; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Visibility Pacts (Reciprocity Groups, Raids, Duets)

Across the 11 months, substantial reach did not arise solely from individual signals but from collective arrangements explicitly negotiated to leverage delivery - what participants called "pulling together," here termed *visibility pacts*. These pacts articulate reciprocity groups (informal pods coordinating comments, saves, and reposts within the first minutes), raids (coordinated audience migrations at the end of one live to an allied live), and duets (collaborative content "stitching" two profiles in the same frame, transferring legibility signals from one to the other).

Culturally, they translate algorithmic imaginaries into observable moral contracts: if the algorithm "tests" content in micro-samples, then offering a helping hand at the outset is a legitimate way of making the community appear, converting belonging into circulation (Bucher, 2017; Beer, 2017). Infrastructurally, these arrangements only make sense in a platformized environment that metrifies reciprocity and renders cooperation auditable via public numbers, chaining transitions across scenes and favouring inter-profile transfers (Helmond, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018).

In reciprocity groups, the native grammar combined etiquette and accounting: comment windows "within 5 minutes," "no flooding" rules, informal spreadsheets of absences and "returns," and, when needed, mild symbolic sanctions (private exposure, temporary suspension). This micro-governance re-enacts, in a metric key, classic principles of brand communities (consciousness of kind, moral responsibility, and shared rituals) now modulated by an expectation of mechanical effect on distribution (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009).

Reciprocity is not only affect; it is also an activation tactic: commenting is not "just support," it triggers an interpreted mechanism for post "lift." As in consumer tribes, solidarity is performed through public signals; quantified, these signals become currency of belonging (Cova & Cova, 2002; Zaglia, 2013).

Raids add a redirection of attention. In over a hundred lives, "passing the audience" functioned as a closing rite: the host urged viewers to "invade" a partner's live, often with a prearranged keyword. For participants, the rite's value lies in avoiding the "waste" of a warmed audience: the destination system would recognize this as a vitality signal. The practice combines a moral economy (those who receive also "return") with a metric economy, as the collective jump generates comment spikes that, per dominant imaginaries, feed the destination's algorithm. CCT reads this as community maintenance practice that, beyond reinforcing ties, redistributes attention capital across ecosystem nodes, thickening alliances and redefining status (Schau et al., 2009; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Duets work as performative couplings that attempt to "stitch legibility": by sharing the scene, actors not only exchange audiences but co-signal styles, aesthetics, and personal brands, anchoring themselves in what is reputed to be "deliverable" in that cycle. For novices, duets often serve as reputational shortcuts - the shadow of the more visible partner legitimizes the emerging repertoire while training form: hook timing, speech cadence, "clean" visuals, early calls to action, composing what natives call "looking deliverable." Literature on the extended self and brand assemblages helps make sense of this co-performative identity work (Belk, 2013; Rokka & Canniford, 2016).

Governance of these pacts reveals hierarchies and vulnerabilities. Group leaders (usually higher-reach profiles) act as arbiters of "what counts," setting participation rules and defining when an action "qualifies" for the metric. This agenda-setting power fosters aesthetic homogenization through repeated templates for openings, captions, and tracks. Standardization lowers uncertainty and entry barriers but flattens symbolic differentiation and reinforces dependence on reputational "bridges" (Belk, 2013; Rokka & Canniford, 2016).

Cementing pacts also requires invisible routines - monitoring groups, replying quickly, meeting minimum interaction targets - aligning with descriptions of aspirational labour and unpaid prosumption, especially among women entrepreneurs in beauty and fashion chains (Duffy, 2017; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010).

In Northeast peripheries, coordination relied largely on mobile messengers and closed lists, with contingencies for connectivity drops and device sharing within families. In infrastructurally intermittent contexts, "pulling together" works as collective insurance against algorithmic volatility: when one profile "stalls," another absorbs the audience handover, and the pact foresees "reparations" in subsequent days. These dynamics echo literature on datafication from the South, where connective technologies are appropriated as moral and economic infrastructures amid vulnerability (Arora, 2016; Milan & Treré, 2019; Nemer, 2022). Pacts here are not only reach tactics but local institutions of care and reputation through which participants negotiate dignity, recognition, and, not rarely, informal credit.

Theoretically, three contributions emerge. First, contemporary consumer communities are *visibility coalitions*: they not only construct shared meanings but administer the circulation of those meanings under metric rules (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009; Zaglia, 2013). Second, belonging incorporates public accounting—showing up for warm-ups, joining raids, accepting out-of-comfort duets—where morality and metrics co-produce legitimacy (Cova & Cova, 2002; van Dijck et al., 2018). Third, these pacts operate as conversion mechanisms: transforming social capital into algorithmic capital and, thereby, into symbolic–economic value, under coordination costs that fall unevenly, reinforcing precarities already diagnosed in platform economies of the Global South (Helmond, 2015; Milan & Treré, 2019; Duffy, 2017).

Performances of Calculated Authenticity

In practice, "authenticity" appeared less as essence and more as a performative competence calibrated for two audiences never fully aligned: the community and the algorithm. Natively, "being real" meant appearing legible to people - affection, closeness, "life story" - while also appearing legible to the platform - swift hooks, brisk cuts, scannable captions, early calls to action.

This fold between expression and calculation echoes, on one side, the extended self in digital culture (Belk, 2013) and, on the other, research on "authenticity as brand," in which sincerity and strategy coexist as a dominant grammar of value (Banet-Weiser, 2012). We recurrently observed *staged glitches*, small choreographed imperfections (a slip of the tongue, an "almost raw" edit, a sudden backstage), that functioned as verisimilitude seals for audiences without relinquishing metric efficiency (Rokka & Canniford, 2016; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Dramaturgically, actors alternated highly edited front stages (feeds, reels) with controlled backstages (stories, lives), switching between polished and intimate registers as situations demanded, recalling the classic scenes/backstage distinction (Goffman, 1959). In connective platforms, however, backstages are publicized and permanently auditable, intensifying the obligation to "appear authentic" to heterogeneous, collapsed audiences (Marwick & boyd, 2011). In observed lives, brief confession ("today was rough," "I'm tired but I showed up") often served as an opening rite before a pitch, combining scripted vulnerability with metric cadence of hooks and calls to engagement. Authenticity thus presents as a negotiated style: enough "mess" to signal humanity; enough form to trigger delivery (Rokka & Canniford, 2016; Helmond, 2015).

The community recognizes and polices these thresholds. When performance slides into instrumental exhibitionism, micro-contestation arises, private DMs, veiled comments, silent withdrawal of support, akin to resistance to opportunistic brands (Holt, 2002; Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006). In reciprocity groups, pushing too hard for comments breaches etiquette; among fashion/beauty followers, overly "perfect" feeds are rebalanced by messy stories and filter-free lives, a tacit pedagogy of "how much polish fits" per arena (Schau et al., 2009; Cova & Cova, 2002). This moral accounting of sincerity, by peers and visible in metrics, anchors trust and delineates acceptability, preserving space for experimentation without breaking the verisimilitude pact (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Zaglia, 2013).

Calculated authenticity demands significant emotional and aspirational labour. Maintaining a steady "real" tone, quick responses, showing up tired without "bringing down the mood," modulating emotions to avoid "hurting delivery", creates invisible load, recurrent especially among women entrepreneurs, aligning with aspirational labour in platform economies (Duffy, 2017).

Because value circulation depends on quantified engagement, the boundary between life and performative repertoire becomes porous: parenting, faith, domestic routines, and business backstages are mobilized as narrative assets when presumed to improve connection and reach. This coupling reiterates

critiques of prosumption, where production of self and content converge in unpaid work captured by platform logics (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Locally, authenticity takes specific forms. Scripts of humility, religious references, and situated humour translate global aesthetics to local moral expectations, reducing dissonance between "appearing as a brand" and "being one of us." Translation mitigates rejection risks for "too showy" content but normalizes patterns that narrow expressive possibilities: novices are taught a kind of sincerity manual ("talk about the grind, show before–after, laugh at yourself but don't cry live") whose horizon is less poetic freedom than algorithmic legibility with local acceptance (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011; Arora, 2016; Milan & Treré, 2019; Nemer, 2022).

For brands and influencers, this engineering of "looking real" aligns with known strategies of brand authenticity-origins, craft display, selective transparency (Beverland, 2005; Holt, 2002). What differs is compressed platform temporality: what conventional markets build in long cycles, social commerce renegotiates daily under instant feedback from metrics and micro-communities (Helmond, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018). Hence "authenticity" appears not as a stable trait but as an adaptive competence tuned by delivery signals and community micro-audits.

Curations of Social Proof

Among the most persistent findings, curation of social proof emerged as the axis converting belonging into circulable credibility. Natively, "proving you deliver" meant assembling and displaying public traces of validation, testimonials, before–after photos, reviews, screenshots of conversations, payment receipts, client reposts, edited into formats with high legibility for people and the platform. The practice coheres with observed algorithmic imaginaries: if the system "rewards" signals of relevance and trust, making approval visible and portable would "teach" both algorithm and audience to recognize value (Bucher, 2017; Beer, 2017).

Platformized infrastructure supports this ambition by metrifying interactions and enabling transmediated circulation of evidence (WhatsApp → feed; feed → live), turning "proofs" into mediable assets with ranking and reputational effects (Helmond, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Culturally, social-proof curation reprises and reconfigures value-creating practices described in brand communities, impression management, social networking, evangelizing, placing them under a metric grammar that renders support audible to the machine and countable to the collective (Schau et al., 2009).

Choosing which testimonials to display, which "transformations" to highlight, and how to sequence client stories constructs narratives of competence and reliability that reinforce consciousness of kind and moral responsibility, as documented in community/tribe research (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Cova & Cova, 2002). The difference here is dual valence: social proof legitimizes before peers and feeds the algorithmic recommendation circuit.

Visually, social proof adopts an aesthetic of "verifiable transformation", before/after, performance comparisons, mosaics of feedback, staging in short form trajectories of value. This links to the extended self and brand performativity literature, in which possessions, images, and public memories stabilize identities and embody market promises (Belk, 2013; Rokka & Canniford, 2016). Classic social influence logics, seeing "others like me" approve, structure justifications and display scripts ("if so many bought and approved, it's safe") (Cialdini, 2009). In connective ecosystems, proofs are cut into easily reframable units (captures, stickers, carousels) ready to circulate across arenas and be recombined per campaign cycle (Helmond, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Empirically, we observed three-layer proof kits. The public, constant layer pins visual seals to the feed (testimonial carousels, fixed highlights of "real clients"). The situational layer reacts to attention spikes (reposting mentions, "stitching" authorized DMs, overlaying countdown stickers). The backstage layer circulates in closed groups, full conversation screenshots, live metrics, weekly "satisfaction panels", operating as moral audit and coordination of what "goes on air" (Schau et al., 2009; Zaglia, 2013).

Together, layers frame social proof as both community resource (collecting and donating testimonials, encouraging reviews) and algorithmic resource (format optimization, carousel pagination, call-to-action placement within first frames).

Local norms police curation: evidence perceived as overly choreographed, generic testimonials, edited screenshots, implausible before–after, triggers discreet contestation (veiled comments, withdrawal of support, refusal to join groups). These micro-sanctions echo CCT critiques of authenticity commodification: when calculation eclipses verisimilitude, the symbolic pact is strained (Holt, 2002; Thompson et al., 2006; Schau et al., 2009). In response, actors "prove the proof": show screens with visible metadata, record the capture moment, forward clients' voice notes, expose typos to attest "realness." Paradoxically, the quest for authenticity heightens technical sophistication of curation.

In Northeast peripheries, proof incorporated proximity markers, religious references, local vocabulary, slang, mentions of neighbourhoods and bus stops, functioning as seals of belonging: "people from here

validated it." Payment materiality (PIX, tab book, hand delivery) appeared as moral proof of trust, often displayed with blurred names. These strategies align with datafication-from-the-South literature, whereby connective technologies are appropriated as moral and economic infrastructures in vulnerable ecologies (Arora, 2016; Milan & Treré, 2019; Nemer, 2022). Overflowing social proof into offline arenas (e.g., photos with clients in the neighbourhood) anchored reputation in existing circuits of recognition, reducing risk of public contestation.

Curation also yields organizational effects. Roles specialized - who "pulls testimonials," who "builds mosaics," who "archives lives and metrics" - distributing invisible labour and institutionalizing audit routines (spreadsheets, shared folders). This managerialization aligns with views of consumer communities as moral organizations prescribing behaviours and validating reputations (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009).

Yet, consistent with aspirational labour literature, the cost of maintaining the "credibility panel" falls unevenly, especially on women juggling service, content, and family (Duffy, 2017). Social proof improves conversion and reduces uncertainty but amplifies unpaid prosumption (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010).

Social proof prepares the bridge to symbolic–algorithmic pricing regimes. In multiple cases, price hikes or discount reductions followed immediately after testimonial campaigns and "real result" mosaics, with explicit justification: "after proving, you can charge what it's worth."

Practically, curation operates as a valorization mechanism: by raising public perceptions of performance and reducing perceived risk, it opens room for repricing, especially when combined with metric peaks (reach, saves) interpreted by the collective as "traction signals" (Cialdini, 2009; Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Theoretically, social proof is a conversion device transforming social capital into algorithmic capital and, via it, into pricing power—an essential link among belonging, visibility, and market value in connective ecosystems (Schau et al., 2009; Belk, 2013; Helmond, 2015).

Community Backstages

If public scenes (feeds, reels, lives) represent the stage where visibility is negotiated, connective backstages function as the underlying engine. These environments, such as WhatsApp groups and DMs, circulate posting agreements, calendars of "hot windows," warm-up lists, reciprocity sheets, and drafts of scripts or creatives. They operate as institutions of local coordination, translating algorithmic imaginaries into practical routines such as "the first five minutes matter," "captions must be scannable," or "the hook comes before second three." In this way, they collectivize responsibility for delivery (Bucher, 2017; Beer, 2017). Within CCT, backstages can be understood as arenas where communities sustain and govern value-creating practices like impression management, networking, and engagement, now reorganized under metric grammars and embedded within platformized ecosystems (Schau et al., 2009; Helmond, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Organizational and relational tasks intersect in these spaces. On the organizational side, there is agile minimal bureaucracy: defining who comments first, preparing templates for "wake-up" messages, building checklists that include time, hashtags, and calls to action, and monitoring presences and absences. On the relational side, everyday gestures such as remembering birthdays, containing frustration with reach declines, or offering editing advice reinforce trust and foster willingness to act collectively. This combination echoes brand communities as moral organizations (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009) and aligns with relational work in connective environments, where ties require affective investment and staged presence (Baym, 2018). Backstages thus produce a social infrastructure that reduces uncertainty, standardizes expectations, and lowers coordination costs in the pursuit of visibility.

From a dramaturgical perspective, backstages re-enact the distinction between frontstage and backstage (Goffman, 1959) with an algorithmic dimension. Private rehearsals are calibrated for two audiences, the people themselves and the recommendation system. Groups rehearse openings, test variations of hooks, negotiate the tone considered authentic for stories, and polish reels, producing calculated authenticity as a shared competence. This backstage engineering minimizes the risks of etiquette breaches in public while simultaneously teaching platform legibility (Rokka & Canniford, 2016; Belk, 2013; van Dijck et al., 2018). The outcome is a living manual composed of delivering examples, templates updated after each campaign, and crisis playbooks to address moments of stalled reach.

Roles and hierarchies emerge naturally. Engagement pullers, social-proof curators, mobile-editing technicians, and moderators maintain etiquette, forming a division of labor that increases efficiency but also produces inequality. Profiles with greater reach set the formats and calendars, decide what counts as valid help, and distribute shout-outs as reputational currency. This governance stabilizes value routines but may homogenize aesthetics and transfer invisible tasks such as fast replies, group monitoring, or the production of closing mosaics to less powerful participants (Schau et al., 2009; Duffy, 2017).

At the local level, backstages adapt to specific logistical realities. Participants use short coded messages to save data, organize on-call rotations to overcome connectivity interruptions, share devices within

families, and rely on voice notes to accelerate instructions. These arrangements demonstrate how, in the Global South, messaging platforms and digital networks serve as both moral and economic infrastructures that sustain coordination and trust in vulnerable contexts (Arora, 2016; Milan & Treré, 2019; Nemer, 2022). The backstage is therefore more than a channel of conversation; it is the nerve center where reputations are negotiated, rules are updated, and rumors about algorithmic changes are collectively tested before becoming accepted practice.

Conflicts also unfold in these environments. Disputes over who receives raids, accusations of free riding, disagreements on aesthetics that appear "too artificial," and saturation from excessive requests are regulated through mechanisms of graduated sanctioning. These include private warnings, reduced priority in warm-up sequences, and temporary exclusions. Such arrangements resemble community maintenance routines in CCT, where belonging involves both affective bonds and disciplinary practices (Cova & Cova, 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). However, they also intersect with the auditable character of platforms, where cooperation can be publicly accounted for by tracking who showed up, who commented, and at what time (Zaglia, 2013; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Backstages operate as mechanisms of conversion. Within them, social capital based on trust, reciprocity, and know-how is transformed into algorithmic capital through coordinated and timely signals, which in turn becomes symbolic and economic capital such as reputation, preference, and sales. They complete the cycle of algorithmic-belonging tactics: signaling rituals gain precision, visibility pacts acquire organizational consistency, calculated authenticity is refined, and social-proof curation is fueled by coordinated flows of evidence. Illuminating this relational and organizational materiality reveals how communities are transformed into systems of visibility engineering, coding the collective in ways that allow circulation under metric rules (Kozinets, 2015; Helmond, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018; Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Symbolic–Algorithmic Pricing Regimes

If visibility pacts and social-proof curations transform belonging into reach and credibility, pricing is the point where this symbolic and metric capital becomes monetary value. Across the field, prices were not simply determined by costs or competition but functioned as performative devices anchored in public metrics such as reach, saves, and comments, in performance narratives framed as "delivery proven," and in moral grammars of "fair value" collectively shared by the community. In CCT terms, prices emerge as cultural syntheses that articulate identity projects, quality judgments, and market ideologies (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), mediated by infrastructures that metrify reputation and publicize signals of acceptance (Helmond, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Three recurrent movements could be identified. The first was metric-traction pricing. Peaks of visible attention, such as full-room lives or carousels with high numbers of saves, were interpreted as "market evidence," opening the possibility of repricing upwards or reducing discounts. Interaction was translated into a "signal" resembling quality signalling under uncertainty (Spence, 1973), yet here the signal was co-produced through visibility pacts and social proof.

When a post "lifted," the community interpreted the product as "hot," reinforcing the idea that revealed demand legitimized adjustments (Kozinets et al., 2010). In this sense, public metrics worked as anchors for expectations (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), shifting the references for acceptable price levels.

The second movement was staged singularity pricing. Practices such as limited drops with countdowns, hand-made personalizations, and "signed" bundles performed scarcity and distinction typical of judgment goods (Karpik, 2010). Social proof not only demonstrated functionality but also qualified singularity, showing who bought, how the product was used, and what symbolic transformation was narrated. These dynamics enabled exclusivity premiums.

The community acted as a judgment device (Callon, 1998), stabilizing criteria for "worth more" in a crowded field of offers. From an identity perspective, higher prices were narrated as recognition of accumulated "belonging work," including response time, visible care, and aesthetic coherence, resembling the conversion of cultural and social capital into brand capital (Schau et al., 2009; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Belk, 2013).

The third movement concerned morally regulated pricing guided by local notions of justice. In peripheral neighborhoods, "charging what it is worth" required balancing recognized rights to remuneration with collective expectations of accessibility and reciprocity. Price increases without a recognized history of delivery were criticized as greedy, while increases following testimonial campaigns were understood as deserved. These judgments resonate with research on perceptions of price fairness (Bolton, Warlop, & Alba, 2003) and the sociology of money, which shows how monetary value is always morally marked (Zelizer, 1994).

Hybrid mechanisms also appeared, such as engagement-conditioned discounts ("follower price," "live coupon") that transformed participation signals into price entitlements. Belonging could thus mean paying less, or paying the same but receiving additional benefits like priority delivery or pre-sale access, reflecting a relational mode of pricing consistent with consumer communities (Cova & Cova, 2002; Zaglia, 2013).

These regimes were codified and taught in backstage environments. Spreadsheets included engagement targets that would "open a window" for adjustments, live scripts featured a proof moment before announcing new prices, and merit ritual checklists integrated successful warm-ups and recent testimonial mosaics. Such backstage coordination shows that prices are organized arrangements rather than mere reactions (Kozinets, 2015; Helmond, 2015). In performative terms, pricing appeared as the effect of devices (metrics, proofs, and pacts) that enacted qualities and justified their translation into monetary value (Callon, 1998; Helmond, 2015).

Algorithmic materiality introduced specific temporalities. Adjustments were timed to coincide with waves of reach, such as immediately after raids or viral duets, reflecting opportunistic rationality in capturing willingness to pay during the momentum of social proof. Conversely, delivery slumps led to defensive promotions framed as "care for the base," a strategy that preserved perceptions of equity and cushioned reputational risk, resembling community management grammars (Schau et al., 2009) translated into price management. When metrics recovered, list prices returned, legitimized as a "return to normal." The result was a dynamic cycle in which prices responded more to fluctuations in visibility than to production costs.

In the Global South, infrastructural precarity and income volatility placed pressure on these regimes. For many micro-entrepreneurs, raising prices without the support of metric or moral ballast was considered risky, since the community could silently sanction by withholding comments, raids, or reposts. As a result, price adjustments were narrated and justified: "after three months of results," "fabric improved," or "now with warranty." Narratives connected social proof, perceptions of improvement, and distributive justice, maintaining reciprocity as a collective horizon (Arora, 2016; Milan & Treré, 2019; Nemer, 2022). Parallel double tables emerged, separating public price and community price, institutionalizing belonging as a discount and demonstrating how monetary value is modulated by ties (Zelizer, 1994; Cova & Cova, 2002).

Theoretically, these findings suggest three contributions. First, public metrics operate as evaluation devices that anchor and perform prices. Second, social proof and staged singularity transform contestable qualities into justifiable value. Third, local moralities mediate the acceptability of adjustments by articulating reciprocity, accessibility, and desert. For CCT, this means understanding prices not as mere numbers but as nodes within networks of relations, signs, and techno-moral calculations, cultural artifacts co-produced by communities and platforms (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Schau et al., 2009; Helmond, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018).

In summary, symbolic and algorithmic pricing closes the circuit described throughout the findings: belonging generates visibility, visibility produces credibility, and credibility is transformed into price. The analysis demonstrates that "charging what it is worth" is less an individual calculation than a collective and infrastructural event, timed by algorithms, moral expectations, and public histories of performance (Callon, 1998; Karpik, 2010; Bolton et al., 2003; Kozinets et al., 2010).

V. Theorizing The "Work Of Algorithmic Belonging"

Definition, Scope, and Theoretical Position

We define the work of algorithmic belonging as the set of interpretive, relational, and performative efforts through which actors in social commerce convert community belonging into legibility for recommendation systems, and this legibility into symbolic and economic value. The construct lies at the intersection of identity projects, market cultures, and consumption ideologies, the classical domains of CCT (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), and the infrastructural layer of platformization and datafication (Helmond, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Rather than treating "the algorithm" as a neutral environment, it positions algorithmic governance as a co-author of communities and identities. What counts as belonging, authenticity, and worth is mediated by public metrics, interfaces, and recommendation routines (Bucher, 2017; Beer, 2017; Belk, 2013).

The work of algorithmic belonging does not replace consolidated categories such as brand community or tribal marketing but rearticulates their grammars under metric conditions. Rituals, pacts, performances, and social proofs, already discussed in studies of brand communities and consumer tribes (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Cova & Cova, 2002; Schau et al., 2009), become social technologies of visibility calibrated simultaneously for people and platforms. In the Global South, this calibration is shaped by infrastructural asymmetries and local moral economies (Arora, 2016; Milan & Treré, 2019; Nemer, 2022).

Conceptual Architecture: Dimensions and Conversion Mechanism

The work of algorithmic belonging unfolds through three interconnected dimensions. The interpretive dimension addresses opacity by constructing imaginaries of "what the algorithm wants," producing legibility heuristics such as timing routines, opening formats, or CTA placement that translate uncertainty into everyday practices (Bucher, 2017; Beer, 2017).

The relational-community dimension converts heuristics into practical coordination: reciprocity in warm-ups, raids, and duets, messenger schedules and agreements, leadership roles, and sanctions, together

forming a participation regime in which belonging also means the capacity to trigger coordinated public signals (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009; Zaglia, 2013).

The performative dimension operates at the human–platform interface, where calculated authenticity and curated social proof render reputations portable and recombinable across arenas, visible to both human publics and the metrics that shape distribution (Belk, 2013; Rokka & Canniford, 2016; van Dijck et al., 2018).

These dimensions converge into a conversion mechanism that traverses the ecosystem. Imaginaries crystallize into routines, routines gain potency through collective coordination, coordination sustains circulable credibility via styles and evidence, and credibility, anchored in publicized metrics, authorizes the re-anchoring of value, including price, in morally acceptable community language (Helmond, 2015; Callon, 1998; Karpik, 2010).

This mechanism introduces the notion of algorithmic capital: the capacity, in specific times and arenas, to trigger favorable distributions of attention by articulating public signals, community coordination, and presentation styles. Algorithmic capital is relational, since it depends on ties and pacts; situated, as it depends on arenas, rules, and temporal windows; and volatile, as it is vulnerable to infrastructural changes. It mediates the conversion of social capital into symbolic and economic value (Schau et al., 2009; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Sensitizing Propositions

The findings support a set of sensitizing propositions, typical of interpretive CCT, that clarify rather than universalize. First, as perceived opacity increases, ritualization intensifies: collectives stabilize shared signaling practices to reduce anxiety and standardize expectations (Bucher, 2017; Beer, 2017).

Second, in metrified ecosystems, community legitimacy incorporates public indicators of participation, such that belonging requires visibly performing reciprocity at key algorithmic-test moments, reconfiguring inclusion and status boundaries (Schau et al., 2009; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Belk, 2013).

Third, authenticity emerges as an adaptive competence: performances balancing vulnerability with efficiency, verisimilitude for people and legibility for machines, enhance the probability of favorable distribution and sustain relational continuity (Rokka & Canniford, 2016; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Fourth, visibility pacts and backstages serve as conversion mechanisms from social to algorithmic capital, raising the ceiling of potential reach and enabling downstream pricing power (Schau et al., 2009; Helmond, 2015; Callon, 1998).

Fifth, robust social-proof campaigns, strategically coupled to metric peaks, re-anchor value judgments through staged singularity, demonstrated performance, and perceived fairness, thereby legitimizing adjustments (Karpik, 2010; Kozinets et al., 2010; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).

Finally, in the Global South, infrastructural constraints and income volatility heighten coordination costs and render algorithmic capital more precarious, intensifying prosumption and aspirational labor burdens, particularly in feminized chains (Arora, 2016; Milan & Treré, 2019; Duffy, 2017; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010).

Boundary Conditions and Scope of Validity

The explanatory power of the construct depends on specific sociotechnical and moral combinations. It is strongest where public metrics are salient and interpretable, where opacity is sufficient for heuristics and pacts to matter, where community density sustains repeated coordination, and where local moral economies provide languages of fairness to legitimize symbolic-to-monetary conversions (Zelizer, 1994; Cova & Cova, 2002; van Dijck et al., 2018). Where metrics are invisible or private, the work of algorithmic belonging shifts toward relational and performative dimensions, with weaker public re-anchoring of value. Where rules are transparent and stable, cultural heuristic space narrows, and incremental optimization prevails, reducing the need for dense pacts.

Category differences also shape the construct. In judgment-good categories (aesthetic or artisanal), where quality is contested and narrative-dependent, social-proof curations and presentation styles become central and enable singularity premiums (Karpik, 2010). In highly standardized categories with rigid prices, performativity remains relevant for converting attention into preference, but its link to pricing power weakens, shifting toward relational benefits such as pre-sale access or enhanced service. In long-cycle markets, such as complex services, the conversion mechanism unfolds over extended periods, requiring sequential social proofs and distributed visibility pacts.

Institutional arrangements further modulate scope. Moderation policies, sudden shifts in organic distribution, or incentives for paid formats may destabilize routines, compress accumulated algorithmic capital, and force collective re-learning. In these moments, belonging work becomes adaptive: communities use backstages to test interpretations of change, renegotiate rules, and update playbooks (Helmond, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018). Conversely, in settings where strong moralities of fairness prevail, repricing depends heavily on narratives of deservedness and perceived improvement, with risks of symbolic sanction in cases of misalignment (Arora, 2016; Milan & Treré, 2019; Nemer, 2022).

Methodologically, the construct was specified in ecosystems centered on short video and live streams. Application to contexts with low public exposure or opaque metrics (such as private messengers) requires adaptation, as algorithmic capital there tends to take endogenous and group-internal forms with fewer ranking effects. In highly consolidated markets with dominant brands and strong paid investment, organic circulation carries less weight; even so, pacts and performances may serve as reputational ballast enhancing paid media efficiency, provided interpretive caution is exercised.

Contributions to CCT and Agenda

The formalization of the work of algorithmic belonging advances four main contributions. First, it reframes identity projects in metrified environments: authenticity becomes a situated practice, shaped by public feedback, with the extended self co-produced by interfaces and indicators (Belk, 2013; Rokka & Canniford, 2016; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Second, it reinterprets market cultures as visibility engineering: communities not only construct meanings but also manage their circulation through pacts, backstages, and proofs, making reciprocity auditable and thus institutionalizable (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009; Helmond, 2015).

Third, it connects CCT to the sociology of valuation and market performativity by showing how devices such as metrics, templates, and playbooks enact qualities and authorize their translation into price, linking moral economies of fairness to calculation (Callon, 1998; Karpik, 2010; Zelizer, 1994).

Fourth, it pluralizes CCT empirically by grounding specification in Brazil's Northeast, responding to calls for contextualized and de-westernized perspectives on platformed consumer culture (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011; Arora, 2016; Milan & Treré, 2019; Nemer, 2022).

Two directions for future research emerge. First, comparative analyses could test the sensitivity of the construct across platforms with varying degrees of metric publicization and across product categories with higher or lower levels of aesthetic judgment, refining its explanatory scope. Second, intersectional studies could examine how gender, class, and territory shape coordination costs and the distribution of gains, particularly in contexts where aspirational labor and invisible prosumption fall disproportionately (Duffy, 2017; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010).

In both directions, longitudinal netnography combined with the analysis of documentary traces of devices (playbooks, spreadsheets, captures) may advance analytical precision while preserving CCT's interpretive vocation (Kozinets, 2015; Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

VI. General Discussion And Implications

The findings indicate that the cultural life of Northeastern Brazilian social commerce is structured as a conversion circuit. Community belonging is translated into legibility for recommendation systems, legibility materializes as public visibility, visibility sustains circulable credibility, and credibility is ultimately converted into monetary value through symbolic and algorithmic pricing regimes.

This machinery, conceptualized here as the work of algorithmic belonging, repositions core notions within Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) by foregrounding the infrastructural layer of platforms, which includes metrics, interfaces, and recommendation regimes, as a co-author of practices of being, belonging, and valuing (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Helmond, 2015; van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018).

Algorithmic governance emerges not as a neutral backdrop but as a condition of possibility for the grammar of the common, defining thresholds of presence, establishing which signals render relationships auditable, and shaping how judgments of quality and fairness can be sustained in public discourse (Bucher, 2017; Beer, 2017; Zelizer, 1994).

On the theoretical level, three shifts are particularly salient. First, authenticity is no longer conceived as an inherent attribute but as an adaptive competence calibrated simultaneously for human audiences and algorithmic systems. Scripted vulnerability, timely hooks, concise edits, and scannable captions compose a style that merges verisimilitude with efficiency, extending the self in ways explicitly mediated by metrics and interfaces (Belk, 2013; Rokka & Canniford, 2016).

Second, communities and consumer tribes cease to be seen merely as meaning-making arenas and become systems of visibility engineering that organize pacts, backstages, and proofs, institutionalizing reciprocity and transforming social ties into coordinated signals legible to recommendation systems (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009; Zaglia, 2013).

Third, pricing is no longer interpreted as a response to cost structures or competition but appears as a cultural artefact performed through devices such as public metrics, testimonial mosaics, and staged singularity. These practices authorize value re-anchoring within local grammars of desert and fairness (Callon, 1998; Karpik, 2010; Bolton, Warlop, & Alba, 2003). Together, these shifts reinforce the argument that market ideologies, identity projects, and consumer cultures are co-specified by infrastructures of platformization and datafication (Helmond, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Managerial implications flow directly from this conversion mechanism. For brands and platforms, understanding native heuristics and community pacts such as cadences, warm-ups, raids, duets, and social-proof routines provides a foundation for design strategies that reduce uncertainty without enforcing aesthetic hyper-conformity. Interventions in functional transparency, such as aggregated feedback on delivery windows, format-level reach labels, or auditable explanations of how saves and comments affect distribution, can reduce dependence on rumours and redistribute agency toward micro-entrepreneurs (Helmond, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018).

For community managers, acknowledging that belonging is partly measured by visible participation suggests the importance of fostering practices that protect expressive diversity without penalizing those unable to be permanently available for warm-ups. Approaches inspired by equity, such as offering participation benefits rather than imposing rigid obligations, can lower friction and enhance relational sustainability (Bolton et al., 2003; Schau et al., 2009).

For brands, strategies that integrate verisimilar social-proof curation supported by metadata, consent, and "proof-of-proof," as well as staged singularity through limited drops and craftsmanship, are more likely to result in pricing power when anchored in genuine metric peaks rather than fabricated ones (Karpik, 2010; Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010).

At the same time, invisible organizational costs must be recognized. Monitoring groups, replying within minutes, maintaining playbooks, and editing testimonial evidence are tasks that disproportionately fall on women in fashion and beauty chains, reproducing patterns of aspirational labour and unpaid prosumption (Duffy, 2017; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010).

Responsible implications include instituting backstage rotations, setting realistic response targets, explicitly acknowledging relational work, and offering training in algorithmic literacy, editing skills, and ethical management of social proof (Schau et al., 2009; Markham & Buchanan, 2012). More broadly, effective management in these ecosystems requires less a focus on content and more on the circulation of people, signals, and expectations under conditions of partial opacity.

The social and policy implications are equally significant. In the Global South, platforms are appropriated as both moral and economic infrastructures. In territories marked by volatile income and intermittent connectivity, pacts function as collaborative insurance against delivery unpredictability, but they also increase labour loads and dependence on attention circuits (Arora, 2016; Milan & Treré, 2019; Nemer, 2022).

This suggests the need for capacity-building programs in algorithmic literacy and microcredit for infrastructure such as connectivity and equipment, as well as good-practice guides for social proof to protect consumers and sellers from manipulation or undue exposure (Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

On the regulatory front, proportional transparency guidelines, including legible explanations of distribution factors, independent audits of major changes, and non-punitive account health tools, could reduce information asymmetries without compromising trade secrets (van Dijck et al., 2018). The local translation of "fair value" observed in the field also suggests policies that recognize relational pricing and progressive access forms, such as community discounts, avoiding their reflexive classification as price discrimination when they function as mechanisms of social cohesion (Zelizer, 1994; Cova & Cova, 2002).

Regarding scope and limits, the proposed theorization is strongest when public metrics are salient, opacity renders heuristics culturally relevant, community density allows repeated coordination, and local moral economies provide languages of fairness to support value adjustments.

In contexts where metrics are opaque or privatized, the work of belonging tends to shift toward performative and relational poles, losing force in the public re-anchoring of value. In hyper-standardized markets, symbolic and algorithmic conversion manifests less in price adjustments and more in collateral benefits such as priority, service, or pre-sale access (Karpik, 2010; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Abrupt changes in distribution rules can destabilize accumulated algorithmic capital, requiring collective relearning in backstages, a phenomenon consistent with the historicity and contingency that CCT attributes to markets (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Helmond, 2015). Although statistical generalization is not the objective, transferability is supported by structural analogies to other platformized contexts, provided diagnoses remain anchored in the "context of context" (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ultimately, the results reposition CCT in relation to the infrastructures that mediate everyday life. By specifying algorithmic capital and making explicit the conversion mechanism linking belonging, visibility, credibility, and price, this study connects CCT to the sociology of valuation and market performativity while maintaining its interpretive vocation for thick description and mid-range theory (Callon, 1998; Karpik, 2010; Geertz, 1973).

Situated in Brazil's Northeast, the analysis responds to calls for empirical pluralization and demonstrates that decolonizing theory is not merely about shifting geographical focus but about reformulating

the very mechanisms through which cultural value becomes economic value under algorithmic governance (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011; Arora, 2016; Milan & Treré, 2019).

Practically, caring for the common through proportional transparency, care routines, and recognition of relational work is not the opposite of performance but its necessary condition in contexts where symbolic circulation increasingly depends on public metrics and the pacts that make them meaningful.

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