

BOOK REVIEW

Gender in the Digital Sphere: Representation, Engagement, and Expression

Mitra, B., Young, S., & Mirza, M. Eds. (2024). *Gender in the Digital Sphere: Representation, Engagement, and Expression*. Rowman & Littlefield. 232 pp. ISBN: 978-1-5381-5568-5

Review by Tim Coady, Librarian for the School of Business, Tulane University

We live in a moment where online infrastructures do more than mirror social relations—they shape, exploit, and calcify them. *Gender in the Digital Sphere: Representation, Engagement, and Expression* attempts to interrogate this dynamic, assembling a wide-ranging scholarly conversation about how gender is represented, negotiated, and commodified in digital environments. Edited by Barbara Mitra, Sharon Young, and Mehreen Mirza, the collection doesn't pretend that the internet is neutral terrain. Instead, it recognizes that platformed spaces—from hashtags to mommy blogs to daytime TV Twitter feeds—are not just venues of expression, but battlegrounds over power, visibility, and ideological coherence.

The collection's strength lies not in a singular theoretical intervention but in its methodological pluralism. Essays move fluidly across ethnography, corpus linguistics, media criticism, and cultural studies. The effect is cacophonous, in a way that reflects the fractured, nonlinear experience of digital life itself. There's no illusion here that a single discipline could hold the full terrain. Instead, the collection takes seriously the fragmentation and inconsistency of the online self—and uses those contradictions to excavate how gender functions under algorithmic governance and cultural acceleration.

One of the sharper choices made by the editors is the inclusion of voices often marginalized in mainstream academic discussions of digital life. Rebecca Feasey's work with younger feminists navigating online activism avoids easy optimism. Her analysis shows that self-described feminists aren't just performing identity; they're negotiating it against shifting currents of ideology, surveillance, and hostility. On the other end of the generational spectrum, Ruth Garland examines how the British program *Loose Women* operates at the intersection of traditional broadcast and platform culture. Her work is less concerned with representation as such, and more with mediation: how the language of feminism is repackaged for mass consumption through women's digital communities. The editors have organized the book loosely around three axes—representation, engagement, and expression—a structure that helps maintain thematic coherence across chapters that otherwise vary widely in scope and focus. Readers are rewarded with recurring motifs: critiques of the public/private divide, struggles over bodily visibility, and the friction between empowerment and performance in digital labor economies. Some chapters deserve particular attention. Hannah Limatius's piece on plus-sized fashion bloggers stands out not only for its methodological rigor but also for its political clarity. Her corpus-assisted discourse analysis traces how the word "fat" is reclaimed—not as a provocation, but as a foundational element of digital identity work. What emerges is a subtle yet forceful articulation of language as infrastructure: not just a vehicle for meaning, but the very terrain on which meaning is contested.

Similarly, McCarron and Mitra's analysis of the #MeToo campaign refuses the simplistic binaries of digital optimism vs. pessimism. By reading the campaign through both Habermasian theory and critical platform studies, they show how visibility online is a double-edged sword—empowering and exposing, simultaneously. Their work is most valuable when it sheds light on the volatility of digital publics: how the architecture of the feed amplifies some voices and buries others, often in ways that mirror offline hierarchies.

There are notable expansions of scope, too. Şim's ethnography of Turkish mommy bloggers decenters the Anglophone gaze; Garland's generational lens opens up important questions about how feminism operates across platforms and age demographics. Together, these chapters resist the worst habits of digital studies: ahistoricism, ethnocentrism, and technological determinism.

Still, the book doesn't go far enough in some places. While corporate power and algorithmic architecture are gestured at in places, there's little sustained critique of platform capitalism or surveillance infrastructures. Zuboff's surveillance capitalism and Fuchs's work on digital labor are absent, and it's a missed opportunity. Without structural critique, it's too easy to treat platform spaces as merely symbolic arenas for identity formation—rather than as monetized systems that extract value from those very performances. Readers hoping for a materialist throughline will find themselves doing some connective labor of their own.

That said, the book's real value lies in its refusal to sanitize the messiness of online gender politics. It does not attempt to resolve the contradictions of digital feminist discourse, nor does it hide from the uncomfortable proximity between self-expression and commodification. What emerges is less a map than a set of coordinates: partial, contradictory, politically uneven. In a digital culture increasingly defined by both hypervisibility and epistemic fragmentation, *Gender in the Digital Sphere* offers a grounded, if sometimes incomplete, toolkit for thinking through what gendered life online actually entails.

While the collection will be of clear interest to scholars in media studies, cultural studies, and gender studies, it also holds value for librarians, educators, and practitioners working in the trenches of digital literacy and online engagement. The range of case studies—spanning platforms, demographics, and geopolitical contexts—makes it suitable for graduate seminars or advanced undergraduate courses that interrogate the intersection of identity and technology. Its accessibility, combined with its methodological breadth, suggests an audience that extends beyond the academy: those navigating digital activism, platform governance, or online representation in a professional or community-based context will find both insights and provocations here.