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Published online: 02 Dec 2021.

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Working for your own folks: the microeconomics of social media

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses a comparative ethnographic approach to explore the ways in which social media enables new economic strategies that capitalize on women's traditional forms of reliance within their local communities. We use ethnographic examples from northern Chile, southeast Italy, and south India to show how women are successful in establishing small but prestigious entrepreneurial activities by using social media to respond to local social and cultural needs. Women use social media to transform both conventional work practices and individuals' notions of work in ways that overcome important structural constraints they face in their respective communities. These findings contrast with optimistic analyses that suggest online platforms decrease global inequalities through bringing disadvantaged people into global economic flows. This article demonstrates the effective ways in which individuals use social media to gradually change local norms related to gender and work while making small but important gains towards economic stability. This process is related to important shifts in sociality that have resulted from social media use within local communities. By focusing on entrepreneurship and gendered aspects of online economic exchange, we develop an understanding of what happens when longstanding expectations for gendered work meet commerce made possible through new media.

Introduction

Dominant news-media narratives often suggest that digital communication technologies – social media, in particular – create unprecedented opportunities. They frame social media as creating opportunities to expand communication technology use for purposes of socialization and economic growth for organizations, enterprises, entrepreneurs, and individual users (Nakara *et al.* 2012, Opa-funso and Omoseni 2014, Taneja and Toombs 2014, Graham *et al.* 2017). For example, it is now widely recognized that the internet has revolutionized the retail industry, allowing small businesses to reach customers and intermediaries outside of their immediate communities, regardless of local facilities and infrastructures (UNCTAD 2018). On the other hand, qualitative research recognizes the myriad micro-economic initiatives that have flourished on social media and through Information and Communication Technologies in far-reaching parts of the world as a result of local, and therefore very specific, understandings and uses of digital technologies (Ali 2011, Nakara

et al. 2012, Kleine 2013, Lekhanya 2013, Opafunso and Omoseni 2014, Chew *et al.* 2015, Irani 2019). For example, scholars have shown that the current digital innovation in India is related to the broader and very specific rise of 'entrepreneurial citizenship' in the country over the past seventy years (Irani 2019), while the local understanding, choices, and use of digital communication technologies by micro-entrepreneurs in rural Chile can be very different from national ambitions and top-down policies (Kleine 2013).

This paper contributes to the social and cultural implications of micro-economic activities in three different global contexts: a mining town in northern Chile, a mid-sized town in southeast Italy, and a cluster of five villages which includes an Information Technology (IT) park in south India. Each of the authors of the paper conducted a 15-month ethnographic study in one of the three locations. The studies were conducted in parallel in 2013 and 2014 and were highly collaborative and comparative (Miller *et al.* 2017). For example, during fieldwork the authors shared the same research methods and exchanged research reports on a monthly basis and commented on each other's work. Most publications that resulted from the research were written from a comparative perspective.

In each of these contexts, social media helps small entrepreneurs form stronger and more meaningful bonds with their local communities especially because they express genuine individual creativity and skills within sometimes rather strict local cultural norms. In all three sites social media has made work more social, allowed for monetization of creative skills, and significantly broadened women's opportunities for work. By detailing similarities and differences between sites, we suggest that social media has a significant micro-economic impact. This impact is often central to stabilizing precarious employment and decreasing social inequalities in dynamic and relatively small and medium sized economies.

This finding is important as most of the existing literature proposes that the economic value of social media is related to different globalizing effects or consequences of increased connectivity, such as suggestions that social media connects users with 'global' or nonlocal consumers (Kozinets 2010, Ali 2011, Friedman 2014, Graham *et al.* 2017). Literature in business and economics often takes the perspective that the primary value of social media is global in orientation and has a direct positive effect on international economic growth and business opportunities (Gratton 2011, Kotler *et al.* 2016). In contrast, economists such as Dell'Ano et al. (2016) suggest that social media may have a significant negative impact on economic growth, as a result of increasing the search costs for information in the context of internet economy and increases the substitution effect from labor to leisure (Dell'Anno *et al.* 2016).

Taking a more worker-centric approach, other recent research argues that the spectacular increase of on-demand work and platform economies have shifted the burden of economic risks and the pressure for lower wages to more vulnerable workers (Friedman 2014), reinforced gendered and racial inequalities (Van Doorn 2017), blurred the line between economic work and people's social lives and hobbies (Drahokoupil and Fabo 2016, Kenney and Zysman 2016), and exacerbate 'commodification' of workers (De Stefano 2015). Critics of work regimes in neoliberalism (Hardt and Negri 2000, Weeks 2011, Sevignani 2017) tend to see these processes as rooted in the late-capitalist mode of production.

Our comparative ethnographic results shine a rather different light on the transformations brought by social media. In all three contexts discussed in this paper, social media has created opportunities for new kinds of online commerce that are entirely local and socially bounded. As these case studies show, local entrepreneurship enabled by social media can help individuals feel their work is more meaningful, connected and relevant than wage-based laborers – in the context in which wage-based work is either not a culturally accepted option or simply not available.

We focus here on women entrepreneurs specifically because women in all three research sites have been particularly successful in building micro economic activities using social media, in ways relevant to local gender-related social norms. They have been able to navigate a some-times-fraught relationship between these local gendered expectations and the autonomy necessary

for entrepreneurship through a kind of personalization of labor possible in their own sustained engagement with, and understanding of local social networks and contexts.

Further, the women entrepreneurs featured in this paper primarily engage with their respective local communities through Facebook and WhatsApp and only selectively through other social media platforms. Therefore, their interactions are influenced by platform affordances (Scolere *et al.* 2018). We use the term social media broadly in the discussion section, but we describe particular social media platforms and their specifics in each ethnographic case study. Though some women engage in entrepreneurial activities that speak to their professional expertise (Duffy and Hund 2015), most of their posts on social media often showcase service to community needs and preferences rather than their own expertise *per se*. As their entrepreneurial activities are bounded in social networks, most women we describe in this paper do not report feeling disadvantaged by boundary-crossing (Conor *et al.* 2015), for example, between home and work or paid work and unpaid work, nor do they feel extra social pressure around identity making and self-presentation.

The paper follows a trajectory where it presents ethnographic evidence through case studies from the three sites – northern Chile, southeast Italy and south India – describing the micro-entrepreneurial use of social media by women and how it is intertwined with building stronger local networks. This is followed by a discussion section where we present our main arguments centered around the mastery of sociality as an inherent objective in local social media based economic networks.

Selling online in Northern Chile

In Alto Hospicio, a mining city near the northern border of Chile, many middle-aged women have taken to Facebook as a market for selling imported apparel and home goods as well as prepared food from their kitchens. These women mitigate in part the low incomes that characterize the area (Haynes 2016), though in reflecting on their selling activities, they highlight the ways this has changed their social relations as well.

Paola moved to Alto Hospicio from another northern city in the late 1990s. She and her 10-year-old son settled in what is locally known as a *toma* – a home they constructed for themselves in order to claim the land on which they built (de Ramón 1990, Sepúveda Swatson 1998). Over time, these housing developments have been legitimized by the municipal government, who has granted de facto ownership of the land to the inhabitants. Despite this bureaucratic shift, they are still considered to be sub-standard living accommodations. Most individuals living in *tomas* still hope to be relocated to government housing, but this is a slow process. Paola lived in a one-room home made mostly of plywood for almost 20 years. In 2015, she was finally relocated, and with an overjoyed expression noted that she now had separate spaces for the living room, the kitchen, the bedroom, and even space for a dining table. Her new home was not one of luxury, owing to its cement floor and cinderblock walls, but it was 'worlds away' from her previous home.

After Paola moved to Alto Hospicio she met Carlos, who worked as a heavy machine operator at the copper mines, a few hours away. Mining is the primary industry that supports the entire economy of Alto Hospicio, making up about 20% of the country's GDP and 60% of its exports. Yet those in the north rarely experience the economic benefits of the industry, whose profits end up in the national capital or with the multinational mining corporations (The Economist 2013). Residents speak of their city as dangerous, marginal, and disenfranchised, but see their marginalization as that which brings them together as a community and places them within local notions that equate respectability with remaining humble.

While Chile ranks among one of the most highly developed nations in the world, it also has some of the highest rates of inequality (Rucks 2017). The majority of Alto Hospicio's residents have incomes and wealth on the lowest end of this wide range, and the city itself is consistently ranked as having the worst urban quality of life in the country. These inequalities also have extended to

internet connectivity. While Chile has high rates of broadband connection compared to the rest of Latin America, Alto Hospicio and the rest of the northern region lag behind (Comscore 2013). Nonetheless, residents find ways to connect, borrowing neighbors' modems and often enduring slow speeds.

Internet has become especially important in the north because miners like Carlos have work schedules of seven days on, seven days off. During their days on, they stay in onsite dormitories, then return home for another seven days of rest. Internet is a key way they keep in touch with friends and family while away at the mine. As many men spend so much time away from the home, women bear the bulk of child rearing and household management. As a result, few women of Paola's age do wage work outside of the home, unless supporting a family business.

Paola explained that she used WhatsApp, Facebook, Skype, and Twitter to lead a number of community activism causes, including managing a mayoral campaign and organizing her neighbors for better rates on electric bills. While social media has been instrumental for keeping in touch with her husband while at the mine, she also highlighted that she uses social media to sell used clothing through Facebook. She would buy used items in bulk and take photos of them to display on a dedicated Facebook page.

In Alto Hospicio, the informal economy has long been important, primarily represented by street vending of both new and used goods. However, Facebook has become an increasingly important alternative for commerce. Both men and women post their own used goods – refrigerators, furniture, baby clothing, or cars – to sell on group Facebook pages like 'Everything for Sale-Alto Hospicio.' Like these infrequent sellers, Paola's business is not enough to sustain the family income. Sometimes she makes as little as $10 a week, a fraction of her husband's salary. On a good week she may take in about $50. But she sees her business as important beyond economic benefits. She sees it as an endeavor that is important to herself and the community.

Selling used items online allows Paola to participate in commerce without taking her out of the home – something that might foreclose the possibility of working for many women in Alto Hospicio. Conducting business from home allows such women to conform to normative notions of gendered labor in the region, in which their primary concern is expected to be maintaining the household while a male wage-earner is at the mine. Men's wage labor is usually seen as the primary economic support for the family, and women's employment outside the home might reflect poorly on their ability to manage the home in the absence of a husband at the mine. However, this case study shows that women's agency represents an integral part of the household economic activity and relies on reaching out and tightening social relations.

The local community recognizes and supports women's contribution to the household economy in many ways. In a sense, northern Chileans understand that the women's work within the home is indeed a full-time job, equivalent to and symbiotic with men's wage work in mining or other local industries. While women who are not able to rely on men's mining pay checks may work full-time in the service industry or with an official stall at the market, online businesses advantage women in two ways. First, though women are not morally judged for having full-time businesses, neighbors may take pity that they *have to* work rather than being able to rely on a male salary. Online businesses, seen as supplementary work, are not subject to this kind of assessment. They also see the flexibility and lack of bureaucracy associated with online selling as an advantage. They are able to set their own hours, so that maintaining the family home remains their priority, again avoiding neighbors' whispers or family members' outright criticisms.

Paola was similar to many middle-aged women who had created online shops. Given the generally low income of families in Alto Hospicio, their work was primarily a way to contribute to their husbands' incomes to make ends meet. But when asked specifically about why they created Facebook businesses, many women suggested they saw it as a way of contributing to the community.

Carmela, who sells handbags imported from China using Facebook thinks of her job as a community service:

> You can't get these products in the [outdoor] market, and it's hard to get to [a neighbouring town] all the time. It's much easier for people to just see them on Facebook, and then they can pick them up from me in my apartment. I don't worry about selling things quickly because [my husband] has a good job at the mine. It's more just for fun. If it takes a while to sell, that's fine. More than anything I just thought it would be nice for the city to have something like this. For people to be able to buy without going to another town, and directly from a community member.

Carmela's explanation paralleled many other women's narratives about selling items through Facebook. Her focus on providing a positive contribution to the community corresponds to the local taboo against showing off or putting on airs. This attitude shows that Carmela's understanding of her economic activity fits local norms. In a Bourdieuian sense, upward mobility in Alto Hospicio is about not just economic means but expressing distinction through taste as well (Haynes 2016, p. 23). Saying that she has opened a business to make more money runs the risk of implying that she wishes to be better off than her neighbors, or that she is dissatisfied with her quality of life. In effect, other residents might see her as aligned with more upwardly mobile Chileans to which the community often contrasts itself.

The ability to work while maintaining a functioning household as well as contributing to community cohesion was no doubt important for these middle-aged women in northern Chile. But personal conversations made clear there was a less vocalized, but more important reason that selling items through Facebook had gained such popularity. One afternoon, Paola gushed about how happy she is when people visit her new home.

> I get so lonely sometimes, you know, when Carlos is at the mine. I have my kids, but it's nice to have other people to talk to. I guess that's why I get so excited about selling clothing on Facebook sometimes. It keeps me busy. I can fuss over taking photos, chat with other women about the products, then they come here to buy them and it turns into a game. We talk, we gossip, we have fun together. It keeps me busy and alive.

Women's use of social media as a selling platform may seem to have little impact on their position within overall economic inequality in Chile, and particularly the ways mining has reinforced gendered and family dynamics. Their online shops have resulted in only modest income increases, and their selling is still confined by their expected gendered priorities. Yet they point out the positive ways selling has affected their social networks and social roles, much as Kleine (2013) outlines. Rather than feeling bound to the home and the family as their only social outlet, they are now able to engage with other individuals on a daily basis in ways that they assess as remarkably improving their quality of life.

Foster (2007) has pointed out that the sociotechnical networks that form around commodity exchanges allow consumers to constitute themselves as publics. Similarly, in the Chilean context, the publics extend to those who do the selling. Through selling items on Facebook these women position themselves as caretakers of the family and of the community, but perhaps most importantly, actually create interactions in which they constitute themselves as socially connected people. Their aim is not to participate in a global economy, but to maintain social connections in their own neighborhoods, even as maintaining the household constrains their ability to spend time with other women. This aspect is central to all case studies presented in this paper: social and community-oriented factors constantly stimulate entrepreneurial activities.

These examples show why economic relations cannot be entirely separated from social relations. Rather than economic activity being an alienating force, as is often the case in the extractive economy that provides the backdrop for these women (Haynes and Wang 2019), they find social value in their small economic transactions. Being social with neighbors, visiting their homes, and generally having a public persona is a key social value in Alto Hospicio, but one that stands in tension with women's familial obligations at times. By engaging in social relationships through selling items online, women are able to negotiate both. In essence, women entrepreneurs confirm that, as early anthropologists suggested (e.g. famously Malinowski 1922 and Mauss 2016 [1925]), individuals are able to consolidate their social selves through exchange, whether concerned with status, reputation, new social interlocutors, or simply finding spaces and instances in which they are

able to pass time in pleasurable ways. The value of their exchange is reflected primarily in the wide social recognition of women's agency, rather than in economic terms.

Monetizing social relations in southeast Italy

We have found a similar account where social relationships stimulate entrepreneurial activities within gendered labor expectations in southeast Italy. Eleanor is in her mid-thirties. She graduated from a creative writing program in Turin but she never managed to find a stable job during the several years she lived in the north of Italy. Her longest employment was as a teaching assistant in a primary school, but one year into this position she realized teaching was not really for her. She wanted a more independent and creative profession.

In 2014, Eleanor decided to return to Grano, her native town in southeast Italy. She negotiated this move with her parents who let her live in a small studio they inherited from their own parents. Grano is a mid-sized town in the heel of the Italian boot, predominantly agricultural, and with a high unemployment rate among young people (40–60%) in the past decade. With no rent cost and really low living expenses, Eleanor felt she had plenty of time to decide what she wanted to do next. She started to use social media quite intensely. At first, she just wanted to express her own emotions in a personal blog and stay in contact via Facebook with her friends who lived in distant places in Italy. Like many highly educated people in the region, Eleanor used to post short rather philosophical and sometimes intriguing texts and original photos she took in and around Grano. In one year, as her posts were constantly drawing a few dozen 'likes,' Eleanor started to realize there could be potential beyond her leisurely use of social media. She started to edit her materials carefully before posting and she re-activated her Instagram profile.

In the summer of 2015, a friend asked Eleanor to manage his professional Facebook page. He was a co-owner of *Nostra trattoria*, a relatively a new restaurant near Grano. He felt his restaurant needed a kind of online presence that was fresh and attractive, and Eleanor could bring these qualities to the restaurant's social media pages. He and his associates offered Eleanor the equivalent of $70 per month to curate the Facebook page of their restaurant. Eleanor knew this was little money, but she accepted the offer with enthusiasm. She always wanted to be paid for doing what she really enjoyed. At first, Eleanor took several high-quality photos of the restaurant with her digital camera. Then, she photographed the arid plains to the west of Grano and the rocky coast of the Adriatic Sea to the east and uploaded them to the Facebook page. In a few months, the owners of the restaurant were really happy with their business Facebook page and especially with the level of interaction on its Facebook wall.

Eleanor remembers that at the beginning of her career she used to work without ever thinking she was underpaid. She was enthusiastic that she could use her taste and skills to earn money:

> I have found a balance here [in Grano] … Being spiritual and very emotional, I am not rewarded by simple things but by emotions. In northern Italy I was paid for three hours a day only, but it was interesting and I liked what I saw and did. Here [in Grano], I am paid. I don't like what I see but I am paid. Social media has an immense value for me – to link all my passions with persons that I want to chat and be in contact with.

Because of this work Eleanor re-activated important social networks that she disregarded during her stay in northern Italy. In addition, she rarely paid for coffee in the trattoria she worked for and she benefited from good discounts when she dined there with her family and close friends. By November when cold weather came in, the restaurant owners felt they should increase Eleanor's salary. In that winter, Eleanor earned between $80 and $180 a month, with a sharp peak during the Christmas period and the New Year when she helped organize several major events in the restaurant, such as live music, DJ sets and contests.

Throughout this experience, Eleanor became more conscious of the value of her communication skills and the impact of her work on the general public. In the spring of the following year, a newly established accessories shop in Grano asked Eleanor if she wanted to coordinate their social media

campaign. *Sadine Bags*, specializing in selling middle range designer bags and leather accessories, faced tough competition in Grano. In a context where established local businesses have major advantages such as free or cheap commercial space and a constant pool of long-established clients, new businesses have to be creative and invest constantly in their image in order to be successful. The owners of *Sadine Bags* invested around $18,000 in the refurbishment of their commercial space and paid more than $1000 a month to rent a generous space on one of the central shopping streets in Grano.

In this context, Eleanor focused on reflecting the newness that *Sadine Bags* has brought to Grano in their online presence: she used professional photographs and her literary skills to craft original Facebook posts. She sometimes alluded to major historical events and the local tradition of hand-craft. At some point, one of the owners offered Eleanor $240 to bring them a few hundred 'Likes' on Facebook. Eleanor knew how difficult this could be, as many popular businesses in Grano only had around one thousand followers on Facebook. Nevertheless, she accepted the challenge and, in a few weeks, she reached the milestone. Eleanor had to request that many of her online friends 'Like' the shop's Facebook page. Most of her friends, including business owners with important online presence, were supportive and immediately responded to Eleanor's request. Entrepreneurship in Italy has a strong history of being based on references in which family and kin play a major role and entrepreneurs usually invest significant time to expand their networks (Chiarello 1983, Barbieri 1997).

Two years into managing businesses' presence on social media, Eleanor has gained renown for her online skills well beyond Grano. She now attracts clients from Milano and presents herself as Social Media Manager. She considers herself a successful social media entrepreneur and she sees being significantly underpaid at the beginning of her career as just a necessary hurdle she had to overcome before eventual success. Underpayment is not necessarily related to the fact that locally, women's labor is undervalued in both social and economic terms. In a region where unemployment among young people has been oscillating between 38%–52% in the past years (Nicolescu 2020), men face similar difficulties until they secure more permanent positions or steady incomes. Most young people are supported by their families and accept lower incomes for jobs they feel can open doors to increasingly better and stable employment.

Unlike in the Chilean case, where smaller numbers of men than women became social media entrepreneurs, in Grano men were just as likely to use social media this way. Unemployment rates among men between 25–34 years old have been constantly around 10% less than women in the same age group. Men are expected to accept conventional jobs that secure the wellbeing of their families. As a result, most men who are online entrepreneurs in Grano do not live – for different reasons – a traditional family life. For example, Giacommo, a self-employed man in his early 40s specialized in graphic design and online advertising of local events, owes much of his success on social media to his reputation of being independent from social relations and having a rather daring public attitude. Giacommo does not miss many opportunities to mock top Italian politicians and local elites, and often disagrees with his employers over payment conditions. He has only half the number of online friends than Eleanor. However, as in Eleanor's case, his online friends help him monetize his activities on social media by constantly finding or commissioning work for him. Thus, rather than turning himself into a social media entrepreneur, Giacommo was almost turned into an entrepreneur by social media itself. He finds the few thousand USD he earns during the three summer months (from mid-June to mid-September) each year enough to complete his revenues as a self-employed graphic designer. Most importantly, being separated and insisting on spending as much time with his children as possible, Giacommo never considered finding a permanent job.

The two case studies in this section suggest that in southeast Italy individuals monetize their online work in strong relation with the social structure. Women entrepreneurs sense a particular burden to keep in balance the local gendered expectations with their work as a relatively autonomous and flexible economic agent. Like in the Chilean case, Italian women entrepreneurs need

constant social validation that their online activities do not contradict social norms. They pay particular attention to showing how their online work *completes* rather than *competes* with their social life.

From adding value to sharing value – motherhood as a business strategy

The Indian field site, Panchagrami, represents a combination of the circumstances of the Chilean and Italian sites. As in Italy, social media is extensively used by self-trained micro-entrepreneurs to run and effectively market their small local businesses. In Panchagrami, important economic benefits from social media are harnessed by women who are highly educated, married, and belong to the emerging middle-class. These women, who are largely college-educated homemakers, often employ helpers and staff members to assist with their home routines. They have relatively more time on their hands than women from lower socio- economic backgrounds and use their different social networks strategically, as an entrepreneurial client base. Women entrepreneurs are careful that their economic activities do not compromise the social contexts of their different online groups.

Panchagrami is a cluster of five villages near Chennai, Tamil Nadu in south India. What makes Panchagrami unique is the recently transformed nature of the area, from a rural agricultural economy to a peri-urban landscape supporting knowledge economy in the last decade and a half, owing to the arrival of the IT sector. This shift has resulted in several socio-economic and infrastructural developments, including gated communities with hi-rise apartment housing, new schools and colleges, a mix of convenience and luxury stores, multi-cuisine restaurants, and spas. With most new households having either a middle-class or an upper middle-class lifestyle, and given the context of the IT empowered knowledge economy (Nisbett 2009), internet and smart phone affluence is considered a social norm. Social media, especially Facebook and WhatsApp, play an important role as a communication infrastructure to build sociality, coordinate activities, and create small groups that emerge in these communities. In particular, online entrepreneurs use the communication exchanged on social media and the related geographical and temporal data as a kind of market research on consumption dynamics to cater products and services to specific needs in their communities.

For example, Vanitha, a 28-year-old engineer, resigned from her IT programming job a couple of years ago after the birth of her first son Aarav. After hiring an au pair, Vanitha wanted to resume her full-time professional assignment. However, her in-laws insisted that she should apply for a part-time, possibly work-from-home job. Not finding a suitable part-time IT assignment for her computing skills, Vanitha was caught in a dilemma. While browsing her residential community's WhatsApp group, Vanitha noticed that her community had some major needs. For example, many working parents kept looking for 'good' activities to engage their latchkey children after school. Vanitha came up with a creative coding class for school children. She asked a reasonable fee for a few hours of coding. As the knowledge economy is central in Panchagrami, working parents welcomed coding classes with enthusiasm. Vanitha ensured that she made the classes playful and engaged the children in a range of activities. Thus, Vanitha set up the coding class as a social and economic solution that responded to both the needs of working parents in her residential community for after-school activities and specific family pressures on her to postpone taking up a full-time job. Vanitha noted

> Most children enrolled in my classes are in primary or middle school. Their parents find it easy to let them engage themselves in creative pursuits and since I teach activity-based coding, it keeps them busy and entertained until their parents are home.

Typically, in middle-class families in Panchagrami, both spouses work. However, many young mothers do not work, owing to the traditional gendered expectation that they be available for childcare. In this context, many social media micro-entrepreneurs are educated married women who

hold professional bachelors or Masters degrees. Most women entrepreneurs feel they want to change something in their professional and personal lives – a phenomenon that has been described as middle-class aspirations of educated women (Radhakrishnan 2011, Amrute 2016). On one hand, working married women – especially mothers working in the IT sector – feel guilty for not being 'proper' mothers for their latchkey children (Fuller and Narasimhan 2007). On the other hand, many homemakers want to work outside their domestic spaces and build alternate socio-economic identities (Mirchandani 1999). In this context, middle-class women often use social media to respond to these different pressures to build and maintain social identities. At the same time, in Panchagrami gendered expectations of labor are shaped by women's different class positions. To employ house help, especially au pairs, chauffeurs, maids, or errand boys in a society like India represents a class privilege (Varma 2007, Jodhka and Prakash 2016). This likely contributes the much-needed time for women in middle and upper middle classes to engage themselves in micro-entre-preneurial activities of their choice on social media. Vanitha, as a member of an upper middle-class family, is aware of this privilege, as is the next example, Bhavna.

Bhavna Venugopal is a 36-year-old, engineering graduate with a Masters degree in Hotel Man-agement. She is now a homemaker and lives with her husband and her parents-in-law in a gated community residential complex of around 500 up-scale apartments in Panchagrami. Bhavna, who prides herself on being a good cook, is also a keen social observer. Soon after joining her What-sApp residential community, she identified several categories of families living in her apartment complex. She found the following categories: (a) extended families formed of grandparents, parents and children; (b) nuclear families with children where usually the mother was a homemaker; (c) nuclear families of working parents and latchkey children; and (d) young married couples with no children.

Observing the numerous WhatsApp groups, she was part of and engaging in everyday inter-actions with people from the complex. Bhavna realized that working parents, especially those in the third category listed above, struggled to cope with domestic chores and other aspects of family life. Working mothers very often felt guilty that their young school children missed their presence at home (Fuller and Narasimhan 2007). Typically, on returning from school in the afternoon, children found a lonely home or were welcomed by their nannies who fed them with leftovers or fast food. Many parents felt their children were tired and hungry in the evening and working mothers felt guilty about their children's poor after school meals. For example, Amritha, a 33-year-old working mother regretted her decision to work full-time especially because she could not welcome home from school her eight-year-old daughter, Seetha, and serve her hot, fresh snacks. All Amritha could do was to check with her daughter's nanny via WhatsApp on what Seetha had as an after-school snack. Sometimes, Amritha asked the nanny to send her a picture of the snacks she prepared for Seetha.

It is in this context, Bhavna used social media to establish herself as a value service provider for her community. She started to cook fresh after-school snacks for children in her residential com-munity. Bhavna figured that working parents with children were using a separate WhatsApp group for sharing information related to school, homework, house help and childcare. She joined this group through a friend who was one of the group's administrators. Bhavna sent an initial message to the group announcing that she would serve hot fresh home-made snacks every afternoon at 3pm – the time when the school day ended and when Bhavna cooked evening snacks for her parents-in-law. She suggested that people could place their orders through WhatsApp and opt to collect the snacks from her apartment or she could arrange for door delivery using her house help. With prices lower than commercial fast food and using e-wallet payment options, her initiative was an instant success. A few days after her initial offering, Bhava saw a surge in demand for homemade snacks, which for most working mothers in the community meant 'proper' care for their children – a true act of motherhood. They felt they could rely on Bhavna to feed their children like a mother would do and at the right time, simply by using WhatsApp. Bhavna then changed the text messages to visual messages with snapshots of the fresh snacks shared just before the end of the school day.

It has been argued that the late global tendencies to see and promote the entrepreneur as a normative model of social life emerged in India after the liberalization in 1991, creating particular forms of entrepreneurial citizenship (Sanyal 2007) and nation-building (Irani 2019). For example, Irani (2019) shows how these recent developments were built especially by middle classes on 'long-standing understandings of development as a collective national project demanding contributions from all citizens.' She argues that if the higher level of political economy entrepreneurship is thought to compensate for the void left by the withdrawal of state-led planning and implementation, at the micro social level most entrepreneurial citizens explore their passions, knowledge, relations, and their environment for opportunities and continuously experiment to add value. This is not simply a search for value, but rather a complex process of recognition of value, which is inflected by caste, gender, regional identity and class.

Women micro-entrepreneurs described in this section feel they use social media to add key social values to their communities while keeping a balance between the need to display conformity with their offline social image and the need to establish themselves as autonomous entrepreneurs. Their educational capital allows them to move beyond local expectations without breaching conventional boundaries. For example, following advice from one of her cousins – a marketing expert – Bhavna expanded her services to extended non-nuclear families. This gesture established unprecedented levels of trust among working mothers and reduced the guilt many felt for asking the elderly in their families to look after their children.

Discussion

In each ethnographic account, we see an interplay of gendered expectations and cognizance of community standards and norms. Paola in Chile, Eleanor in Italy, and Bhavna in India all use social media to build their entrepreneurial skills while being conscious of local contextual constraints on their position within their respective communities. All of these women understand and use knowledge of their social contexts intelligently and strategically. They ensure that they adhere to local expectations, while at the same time constructing identities for themselves through the public visibility and communication opportunities offered by social media. Women may subtly disrupt domestic boundaries without overtly toppling norms, while simultaneously aligning work to their own interests and desires, showcasing creativity, and enriching their social lives. They do this all by building sociality within their local communities. Hence, women entrepreneurs have found business practices that gently shift rather than flagrantly defy local gendered expectations and norms. In all three cases, women entrepreneurs perceive their work as a value-added service to their respective local communities, rather than solely as an economic activity, and also highlight their relationships created and sustained through these exchanges. Economic activities for each of them, have fostered and catalyzed both temporary and permanent forms of sociality within their communities. Hence, even while engaged in a network of interactions economically, they perceived themselves as social agents rather than as pure economic agents.

This perception of being socially rather than entirely economically driven underscores our second argument, that middle-class women use social media strategically in expanding their economic options when they are constrained by structural limitations and cultural traditions. This conclusion expands on Duffy's (2017) assertion that there are limited possibilities to monetize aspirational work on social media in relatively affluent places. In all the cases presented in this paper women incorporated economic pursuits as central to their online activities in order gain autonomy. However, they do so while their actual ambitions are social in nature, rather than purely economic. For example, they see monetary profit as a by-product of their increased sociality made possible by social media in relation to their personal and professional skills. This increase in sociality gives women possibilities of crafting new social identities in their respective communities. In all case studies presented in this paper, women entrepreneurs attain social positions and pursue economic activities that their communities regarded as unsuitable or undesirable before social

media. This ethnographic evidence overlaps with aspects of soft promotion, intimacy and visibility that Duffy and Pruchniewska (2017) note can emerge online in order to conform to traditional prescriptions for femininity. However, the women entrepreneurs described here evade such social pressures mainly because they balance conformity to conventional norms in their offline lives with relative autonomy online, resulting in a complimentary rather than contradictory relationship between the two. Therefore, these women cannot be strictly characterized as 'cultural entrepreneurs' working in the areas of Cultural and Creative Industries (CCI), nor do they engage in building an individualistic brand identity which is completely online (McRobbie 2004, Gill 2007, McRobbie 2015, Duffy and Wissinger 2017, Naudin and Patel 2019). All of their engagement with their respective communities speaks to building an identity through value added services that support the community rather than overtly showcasing themselves as entrepreneurs who engage only in business.

Women entrepreneurs presented here find it difficult to draw a line between their economic work and their social lives and hobbies, and sometimes they may even discover how irrelevant and formal such a line would be for them. This blurriness has been associated with the mode of production in late-capitalism (Hardt and Negri 2000, Nippert-Eng 2008) and, in particular, with recent changes in the nature of employment (Weeks 2011, Van Doorn 2017). For example, some scholars argue that emerging digital economies are often imbricated with issues of precarious employment and work exploitation (Nakamura and Chow-White 2012, Stevens *et al.* 2017). These include increase of social inequalities and social tensions (Sevignani 2017, Sunstein 2018) and the redistribution of economic risks, low wages and social and economic insecurity onto vulnerable workers and their families (Friedman 2014, De Stefano 2015).

However, the women entrepreneurs presented here are different because they manage to attain a certain degree of stability and predictability to their economic activities, even if these benefits are still hindered by issues related to national economic inequalities (in the case of Chile), unemployment (in the case of Italy), and gendered expectations of labor in all three sites. Furthermore, there are important socio-economic differences among women that are most visible in the case of India. Here, women's socio-economic position and the support many receive from women who are hired to attend to domestic tasks, enables the 'stability' they can to access through their social media work. This means that such work is not motivated by financial necessity, but by desires related to identity, sociality, and creativity. These features are possible because economic activity is intrinsically related to, and depends on, women's capacity to build social legitimacy and trust within local social relations.

While our ethnographic findings support the literature on work which argues that gender, class, and socio-economic factors play critical roles in relation to employment (Oakley 2018 [1974], Baba 1998, Parry *et al.* 1999, Hodson 2001, Grint 2005 [1991], De Neve 2005, Gill 2007), it also highlights that social media has shifted opportunities for people who can find rewarding and relatively stable employment in their own communities. We have seen that in some contexts, this is not limited to women. For example, in southeast Italy different categories of men, such as those with high educational background, artisans, and some manual workers also use social media to monetize their skills. However, women use social media entrepreneurship to access spaces, like businesses and public spaces, which were traditionally reserved for men.

Therefore, our argument responds to some of the questions raised by feminist scholars on the apparently new practices and visibilities of women in different contexts of the twenty-first century. For example, Gill (2016) aptly questioned the actual meaning of the new visibility of feminism, the associated sensibilities intimately connected to political economy and the problems caused by the multiplicity of different feminisms currently circulating in mainstream media culture. Our paper offers ethnographic responses to such questions which show the ways in which women can expand their selves and skills beyond traditional settings. These activities may not represent long-term options and may not increase social security. However, they are crucial for the women in our research who do not want to migrate for work, do not want to put their families at risk by spending

too much time away from home, and do not wish to explicitly flout gendered social norms. Social media entrepreneurship is therefore seen as a good alternative to options that more drastically disrupt their lives. This finding should be read in conjunction with McRobbie's (2015) observation that the recent re-entering of feminism in its variety of forms into political culture and civil society is related to a certain gendered horizon of expectation that can lead to individualizing projects made to seek self-definition and fit with the idea of competition. Our article contributes to this discussion by illustrating the complexities of how gender, class, socio-economic factors, and social media play in relation to employment and the negotiation of local norms. In particular, our findings set a qualitative lens to arguments that gender and entrepreneurship can have a scaled correlation (Mayer 2006, Marlow and McAdam 2012) and bring important nuance to the Western notions of individualism in entrepreneurial exploits, acknowledging conditions for non-hegemonic ideals of community-oriented capitalism.

Our third argument is related to the local, rather than global, relevance of social media entrepreneurship. The impact of small businesses and entrepreneurship on a market economy (Carree and Thurik 2003, Acs *et al.* 2008, Opafunso and Adepoju 2014, Storey 2016 [1994]), and the significant role social media have to bring and keep small businesses on the market (Nakara *et al.* 2012, Taneja and Toombs 2014) has been well documented. This paper contributes to these studies by showing how the new dynamics of micro-economic ventures respond to very specific cultural norms and social needs of local communities.

This argument represents a nuanced response to early analyses of social media, which were quick to suggest that new communication technologies can contribute to the demise of social inequalities through offering disadvantaged individuals access to various educational, cultural, or economic resources (Ali 2011, Jeffrey and Doron 2013). These analyses understood online education, commerce, and increasing social networks as possible conduits for lessening social divides. In response, our ethnographic materials suggest a more nuanced perspective. While in some contexts, access to resources made available through social media may reinforce traditional systems of power, social hierarchy, and social and economic inequality, in other cases they help individuals and groups to make great strides in closing economic and social gaps. For example, women we have discussed here use social media to form stronger bonds with the local community, rather than to attach to global ideas and access global markets. This argument contributes to the existing literature on the future of work which focuses on the implicit role of technology (Gratton 2011, Johns and Gratton 2013), the market strategies in the age of digital competition (Taneja and Toombs 2014, Cusumano *et al.* 2019) and the rise of the self-help literature and social media based entrepreneurship through which individuals can 'better manage' both domestic and professional lives (Buckingham 2011, Ferriss 2011 [2007]).

These findings also qualify the arguments that social media can represent an opportunity to establish and scale meaningful relationships (Miller *et al.* 2016) and nuance the conventional narratives focused on entrepreneurs using social capital to access resources during the establishment process (Kolvereid and Obloj 1994, Greve and Salaff 2003). The ways entrepreneurs are embedded in their local communities, and their deep understanding of social relations, cultural contexts, and normative practices help them offer both economic and social value to their consumers, and this process might be difficult to decipher as an outsider. Anthropology and economic sociology should take this as a starting point to look into the substantive and practical aspects of new economies.

Conclusion

This paper focuses on the possibilities for creating economic value by combining personal skills with social relationships through social media entrepreneurship. This type of economic value is peripheral to market economies and conventional economic explorations but it is often crucial for individuals and families who might be considered marginalized by global economic flows. In particular, women entrepreneurs use their close knowledge of social networks to complement or make

up what economists described as markets' reported lack of efficiency in the supply of public or group goods (Hollingsworth and Boyer 1997, p. 19). The fact that individuals and businesses are increasingly more connected, visible, and aware of each other due to internet and social media use leads to a situation in which individual economic initiatives are intrinsically related to processes of everyday social learning. Women entrepreneurs find creative and non-disruptive ways to embed technologies in daily micro-economic transactions that create social values for their communities.

This movement from the perception of social media as a global phenomenon to social media as facilitating local contacts and contributing to economic growth in indirect ways is central to the paper. Our ethnographic material suggests that women use social media to find effective ways to overcome stereotypes and lack of support in their own social contexts. Many women in these comparative ethnographies who express their individual skills and knowledge via small social media ventures appreciate a remarkable improvement in their quality of life. In each case presented here, social media change both existing work practices and individuals' notions of work in ways that respond to, rather than challenge, conventional forms of reliance on local communities. In a larger perspective, these processes might push societies at large to adopt such changes in their economic, social and cultural dynamics, which could represent important and steady consequences in the long term.

Acknowledgement

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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