

Poshmark and other hustles: Neoliberal feminism in an economy of clicks

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Introduction

In October of 2019, 1.600 Poshers met in Phoenix, AZ to celebrate and develop the home-based clothing resale businesses they run on Poshmark, a social commerce platform, where 4.5 million resellers list a cumulative 290.000 items daily (SEC, 2020). For two days, these women attended workshops and exchanged business cards. In their sticker-adorned notebooks (#poshboss #bosslady), they scribbled down how to grow their businesses, manage their social media and ultimately earn more money. They shared stories of hope, fear, recovery and personal development while at the same time lamenting the hours a day they spent on the app.

Poshmark is a social commerce app launched in 2011 that caters to a growing community of entrepreneurial sellers (Poshers), who resell merchandise from thrift stores, discount retail sales, estate sales and wholesalers. Poshers stem from all corners of the United States¹ with upwards of 80% of sellers being women (SEC, 2020). Poshers are part of a growing group of women, who are turning to digital entrepreneurialism to supplement structural inequality caused by a lack of maternal leave policy, rising daycare costs, increased costs of living and mounting student debt. Poshers self-identify as #hustlers taking ownership of their financial destiny to feed their families, pay off student loans and go on dream vacations (Ravenelle, 2019).

I use the term digital hustling here to describe Poshmark and, more broadly, the type of work done in the platform economy to forefront the navigation of precarity performed by those whose participation in the labour market is challenged (Alacovska et al., 2021; Thieme, 2018). Other common labels are crowd or gig work, referring to types of digitally mediated service work that are on-demand and task-based, such as driving for Uber (Fleming, 2017). However, orienting this study in hustling instead connects it with a broader practice of marginalised people engaging in informal work adjacent activity in grey areas of the economy, such as street corners (Bourgois, 2003; Whyte, 1943), pool rooms (Polsky, 1967), and brothels (Dalla, 2006). Digital hustling extends this phenomenon, tapping into the neoliberal trend to commodify and marketise swaths of the economy, including informal labour (McMillan Cottom, 2020).

Drawing on four years of ethnographic study, this paper, an empirical section of my dissertation work, illustrates how digital granularity on Poshmark (and, by extension, the

¹ Poshmark launched in Canada in 2019, Australia in 2021 and India in 2021. My data collection has mostly focused on the United States, due to it being the original and largest market, with the inclusion of some Canadian sellers

digital hustle economy) affords neoliberal feminism. My engagement with the field site has been through a combination of traditional and digital ethnographic methods, including attending the company's annual conference, PoshFest 2019, managing a Poshmark account with 4.000 followers, interacting with 266 seller accounts on Instagram, sixteen Facebook discussion groups, two Reddit threads, ten YouTube channels, and collecting relevant artefacts from such news media as press releases. Using digital ethnographic methods, I have used such sources to construct fieldnotes through thick descriptions of sellers' practices, challenges, celebrations and fears. I have also used this to chart the development of the platform and shifts in its designs and policies. My participant observation has been supplemented by 37 textual interviews conducted with the messaging functions on social media (some of these ongoing conversations stretching for years), as well as four interviews conducted via video conferencing software. My observations and discussions have been with sellers who pursue entrepreneurialism on different scales, using Poshmark as a form of sustenance and stable income. While my conversations have been diverse, zooming in on specific incidents, the underlying themes discussed of work, womanhood and balancing financial challenges remain constant. Because of the highly gendered nature of the platform, I have only rarely captured the voices of male participants, who are largely silent in the spaces I have attended to. Finally, I have not spoken to the platform², and instead positioned myself as a seller would, navigating the online Poshmark hustle.

From granularity to hyper-capacity

"My future plans for Poshmark are, hopefully, that I can stay at home with my kids. Not that I don't love nursing anymore, it's just that nursing, you don't have the same flexibility as Poshmark, where you can still be with your kids, and then also earn a little bit of money while they're sleeping or at school, and I can volunteer in their classes, things that I wouldn't be able to do, if I was working full time" (PM_37).

Lauren, the Posher quoted above, told me about her personal configuration of career, reselling, and family in a series of voice memos, recorded over the sounds of her kids playing in the background, which perfectly illustrates one of Poshmark's core value propositions – flexible career at the touch of a button. Core to Poshmark's flexibility is the extent to which they have granularized work into small chunks of time, in some cases needing only seconds to perform. Granularity is a core property of digital technology, referring to the minute size that constitutes a digital object (Kallinikos et al., 2013).

For instance, sharing, a core function of selling, takes mere seconds. Sharing is integral to Poshmark, driven by CEO Manish's vision of people-centred technology based on "*sharing posh love*". Sharing functions through two means: self-sharing and community sharing. Self-sharing is a process whereby Seller Stylists can promote their own listings, clicking a single button for each listing, which moves to the top of their closet, and pushes

² During PoshFest I was able to speak to some representatives of the company, however other attempts to obtain an interview have been denied.

to the feed of all their followers. Sharing also boosts the listing in the search results, as most recently shared items are default displayed first, ensuring that if a buyer performs a related search, the listing will be displayed higher in the results than competing products. Community sharing, on the other hand, is a process of promoting other Seller Stylists' listings by clicking a button to promote a single listing from another's closet. This might seem counter-intuitive, but the aim is reciprocity, reaching potential new feeds and new buyers for both sellers. Following is like other social media platforms – a way to curate what listings will appear on your personalised feed. On Poshmark, this has become another way to promote your closet, and make sales, meaning sellers typically have upwards of 200K followers, and the follow button has become another that should be pressed a few hundred times a day. As the platform has scaled over time, sharing and following have turned into a pattern of sellers progressively clicking in greater amounts to remain visible and make sales. Such a micro-focus has ultimately turned Poshmark into a platform synonymous with, put simply, insane amounts of click work³.

Put another way, Poshmark *creates idle capacity* through granularizing work into the single click of a button, sharing or following, or a small series of clicks, uploading an item, all possible to accomplish while waiting for the elevator, the doctor's office, or watching your kids. In a similar vein, Uber granularizes taxi services into individual rides, creating idle capacity for freelance driving, while Airbnb granularizes hotels into rooms and creates idle capacity for homegrown bed and breakfasts. Notably, Poshmark, and by extension the platform economy, does not simply draw on the idle capacity that is free, waiting to be utilized, but in fact, creates it in an expansive way introducing the potential to work in the minutia of sellers' lives.

Because granularized activities can be performed in-between other activities, Poshmark has a unique appeal for women raising small children who benefit from income while maintaining their role in the home, something the company leverages in their branding as being perfect for part-time income generation. As Lauren, introduced previously, expanded:

“[Poshmark] is around the clock. But that's, the biggest benefit for me because having two kids, and it doesn't give you the nine to five like the rest of life does. And I want to make sure they know I'm there for them, while also earning my own income, which is really important to me”

The way Lauren, and countless others are leveraging flexibility makes Poshmark a popular solution to economic needs balanced against childcare and the still prevalent norms of women as primary caregivers (Hochschild & Machung, 1990; Jacobs & Gerson, 2004; Walker et al., 2008). During my two days at PoshFest 2019, nearly every woman I met in their late 20s to early 30s had children. It was something the women bonded over, sharing stories of packing lunches and Poshing with kids. During all panels, references to raising children and mantras like *“bringing up the littles”* drew praise and claps from the entire

³ For an expanded discussion of these runaway dynamics of sharing see Ens and Márton, 2021.

room. Poshmark has indeed leveraged this logic, forefronting motherhood and female entrepreneurship consistently as part of its brand and advertising sharing as a fundamental activity to achieve success while emphasising its appeal as micro-labour.

Normalising role conflicts between family life and work as something that can be solved at the individual level through granular clickwork is precisely how Poshmark supports and affords neoliberal feminism. Departing from a liberal feminist stance, which is centred on equal rights, liberation, and emancipation, neoliberal feminism solves unpaid reproductive labour through *balance* (Rottenberg, 2014, 2021). Drawing on examples like Facebook COO Cheryl Sandberg's book 'Lean In' neoliberal feminism "*engender[s] a new model of emancipated womanhood: a professional woman able to balance a successful career with a satisfying family life*", with balance as the new feminist ideal. In Sandberg's case (along with other elite women), balance is achieved through expensive, outsourced childcare, which systemically widens the gap between those who can afford to achieve balance through such privileges and those who cannot. Balance provides is the promise of 'having your cake and eating it too', offering an alternative to the expectation women face to give up their aspirations of career when it conflicts with other existential milestones, such as having children (Baert et al., 2022).

Poshmark demonstrates an alternative mechanism for achieving balance, circumventing the need for expensive childcare. Balance is instead made accessible to the masses through granularizing work to a single click. In other words, for those not privileged enough to hire a nanny, neoliberal feminism is upheld through creating idle capacity in granularized moments that were previously too small or inaccessible to work in. One seller, Ophelia, summarised the complexity of such a solution so nicely, "*yes, the benefit is that moms are sharing closets (so working) while at soccer practice, but again, moms are working while at soccer practice*" (FN_485).

Concluding remarks

In summary, this abstract has looked at how Poshmark creates idle capacity, affording a neoliberal feminist solution to balancing childcare and work demands. Such a finding is crucial to understanding the changing nature of work, illustrating how digital technology plays small but essential roles in enabling pre-existing societal structures through ad hoc solutionism. It is no irony that Poshmark, offering an easy solution to material realities, is thriving when women are becoming full-fledged members of the professional classes, outpacing their male counterpoints in terms of university completion, while still lacking systemic solutions to reproductive their labour (NCES, 2020; US Census Bureau, 2021). However, paying careful attention to the way neoliberal feminism operates, failing to challenge the prevailing structures and status quo, makes such solutions a cautionary tale in enacting fundamental changes in women's rights and potential. In this case, the solution presented does nothing to challenge the differences women carry with respect to raising children. Taken to its logical conclusion, the balance offered here contributes to these

systemic problems, offering an individual path to economic fulfilment without demanding any systemic change. Put simply, Poshmark's version of balance contributes to the very problem it wishes to solve by finding more granular moments for work, increasing the expectations on women to overcome their biological and systemic challenges through creating more hours in the day.

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