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Platform governance at the margins: Social media creators' experiences with algorithmic (in)visibility

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Abstract

While champions of the "new" creative economy consistently hype the career possibilities furnished by YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and the like, critics have cast a spotlight on the less auspicious elements of platform-dependent creative labor: exploitation, insecurity, and a culture of overwork. Social media creators are, moreover, beholden to the vagaries of platforms' "inscrutable" socio-technical systems, particularly the algorithms that enable (or – conversely – thwart) their visibility. This article draws upon in-depth interviews with 30 social media creators – sampled from historically marginalized identities and/or stigmatized content genres – to explore their perceptions of, and experiences with, algorithmic (in)visibility. Together, their accounts evince a shared understanding that platforms enact governance unevenly – be it through formal (human and/or automated content moderation) or informal (shadowbans, biased algorithmic boosts) means. Creators' understandings are implicated in experiential practices ranging from self-censorship to concerted efforts to circumvent algorithmic intervention. In closing, we consider how the regimes of discipline and punishment that structure the social media economy systematically disadvantage marginalized creators and cultural expressions deemed non-normative.

Keywords

algorithms, creators, identity, platform governance, social media, visibility, work and labor

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Introduction

In September 2021, *The Wall Street Journal* published a probing investigation into the so-called "Facebook Files." Supplied by whistleblower Frances Haugen, this leaked collection of internal documents revealed how executives for the company ignored a raft of evidence about the potential for Facebook and Instagram to adversely impact users' mental health and civic participation (Horwitz, 2021). This was by no means the first time the world's top-ranking social media company was thrust under a high-powered microscope; suffice it to say, Facebook has been embroiled in controversy for years, especially in the wake of the still-fomenting "techlash" (Su et al., 2021). But while the report provoked a new wave of outrage, somewhat less attention was devoted to newfound accounts of the company's "cross check program." Billed as a "quality control" mechanism, the program furnished different sets of content moderation "rules" to "high-powered" users. As the *Journal* summarized, the cross check program enabled politicians, celebrities, and journalists to "abuse the privilege, posting material including harassment and incitement to violence that would typically lead to sanctions" (Horwitz, 2021). Such claims – while alarming in their own right – stand in marked contrast to the rhetoric of neutrality touted by Silicon Valley mouthpieces (Gillespie, 2010; Marwick, 2013; Vaidhyanathan, 2011).

Facebook is not the only mainstream social network to apply different sets of rules to distinct user groups. While Twitter has allowed elected officials to flout content stipulations (Glazer, 2020), YouTube's efforts to moderate hate speech – while laudable on the surface – have amounted to what Matsakis (2018) described as "lines [drawn] inconsistently in practice." To Caplan and Gillespie (2020), such variations are a product of YouTube's ostensibly tiered system of governance, whereby the platform applies "different sets of rules, different material resources and opportunities, and different procedural protections when content is demonetized [i.e. financially penalized]" (p. 2).

Crucially, while platforms' decisions about *who* or *what* to regulate can shape society's wider informational and entertainment agendas, the impact on creator communities is especially acute. After all, a social media creator's career success – be it their potential to garner and/or monetize audiences, entice brand "partners," or convince legacy media of their sway – is directly related to platformed indices of visibility (i.e. views, likes, favorites, shares). And so, if the pursuit of visibility enlivens creators, its opposite – invisibility – is widely perceived as a "threat" (Bishop, 2019; Bucher, 2012). It is in this vein that Cunningham and Craig (2019a) herald the "new regulatory era" (p. 266) – one structured by platform interests and content moderation whims – as "a clear and present danger for creators" (p. 256).

Content creators' accounts of platform governance – whether enacted at the hands of human content moderators or via artificial intelligence – suggest that these systems are not merely inconsistent; rather, they are mired in social inequality. In 2018, for instance, members of YouTube's LGBTQ+ creator community charged the platform with systematically demonetizing the content of queer creators (Romano, 2019). More recently, TikTok comedian Ziggi Tyler garnered widespread media attention after discovering a key mechanism through which Black creators are censored: an algorithm linked to the much-hyped Creator Marketplace was blocking queries for the term "Black," including references to "Black Lives Matter" (Columbo, 2021). Though TikTok representatives

responded with a public *mea culpa*, Tyler's account attests to the social *and* economic stakes of platform governance.

Understanding social media creators' experiences with platform (in)visibility seems especially critical given their role in reconfiguring both the processes and products of cultural production (Poell et al., 2021). Accordingly, this study examines creators' perceptions of algorithmic platform governance, which Savolainen (2022) defines as "social ordering carried out by social media platforms through the employment of automated means, blending human and machinic agency" (p. 2). Following from writings on algorithmic imaginaries (Bishop, 2019; Bucher, 2017), we acknowledge the interrelated nature of user *perceptions* and *practices*, particularly in cases where the material realities of software are belied by their opacity (Natale, 2019: 713). Or, as Lomborg and Kapsch (2020) put it in their examination of algorithmic decoding practices, "[Even] if we cannot open the black box itself, we *can* study the relationships that people experience with algorithms, and by extension how and to what extent these experienced relationships become meaningful and are interwoven with users' reflections of power, transparency, and justice. . ." (p. 746, italics original).

Data for this project come from in-depth interviews with 30 social media creators working across a span of mainstream platforms: YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitch. In response to persistent accounts of algorithmic bias (e.g. Are, 2021; Noble, 2018), we sampled from historically marginalized identities and/or stigmatized content genres. Together, creators' accounts evince a shared understanding that platforms enact governance unevenly – be it through formal (human and/or automated content moderation) or informal (shadowbans, biased algorithmic boosts) means. For many interviewees, platform punishments were believed to be a consequence of their social identities and/or politicized genres of content. At the same time, creators shared a sense that more "mainstream" creators evaded these punitive systems while reaping the rewards of platforms' visibility provisions as likes-and-clicks currency. Creators' interpretive understandings, we show, were implicated in experiential practices, ranging from content suppression (i.e. self-censorship) to concerted efforts to circumvent algorithmic intervention. In closing, we consider how the regimes of discipline and punishment that structure the social media economy disadvantage marginalized creators and cultural expressions deemed non-normative.

From media regulation to platform governance

Over the 20th and into the 21st centuries, the regulation of media content – be it news, advertising, and/or entertainment – evolved in response to the oft-competing interests of cultural producers, policy factions, and commercial players (Freedman, 2008). The regulation of digital content is, however, an entirely different animal: material is created by *users*, at an astonishing *volume*, and circulated on a *global scale*. Perhaps not surprisingly, policies inherited from the 20th century media environment fail to effectively translate into social media contexts. What is more, the rhetoric espoused by platform stakeholders, namely their patterned insistence that they are *not media companies*, has allowed them to evade liability for content supplied by users (see Gillespie, 2018; Napoli and Caplan, 2017).

Despite – or more likely *because of* – such disavowal on the part of platform companies, investigations into digital governance have abounded in recent years. Summarizing this cross-disciplinary sub-field, Gorwa (2019) writes that platform governance approaches "provide an appreciation for the functions, affordances, and politics of contemporary platforms, and illustrate the contours of how platform companies currently govern user behavior" (p. 859; see also, DeNardis, 2014; van Dijck, 2021). A through-line in critical writings on platform governance is that decision-making mechanisms are largely concealed to the public (Gillespie, 2018; Poell et al., 2021; Roberts, 2019; Savolainen, 2022). While Roberts (2019) draws attention to the *hidden-by-design* workforce of content moderators, Gillespie (2018) contends that invisible content moderation decisions play a critical role in the cultural norms that animate civic discourse.

Other researchers have, by contrast, foregrounded the perceptions and practices of platform *users*. Writings on "algorithmic imaginaries" (Bucher, 2017), algorithmic "folk theories," (DeVito et al., 2017; Savolainen, 2022), "algorithmic decoding practices" (Lomborg and Kapsch, 2020); and the "hermeneutics of algorithms" (Andersen, 2020) collectively reveal the meaning-making processes of users as they navigate the "black-boxed" algorithmic systems that automate platform governance. Users' collective perceptions of algorithms are, moreover, implicated in "interpretive actions" (Andersen, 2020), including what Bucher (2017) usefully describes as "practices [that] also have the ability to affect the very algorithms that helped generate these responses in the first place" (p. 42).

Of course, as these and other writings make clear, users' understandings of algorithms and other governance mechanisms are neither even nor consistent. Indeed, users' possess markedly different algorithmic literacies, including those linked to demographic variables, economic incentives, existing knowledge structures, and affective orientations (Gran et al., 2021; Klawitter and Hargittai, 2018). Lomborg and Kapsch (2020) have thus issued a call for additional research into "how algorithm decodings and their implied politics may vary with social groups within specific societies" (p. 759). Following from this, it seems crucial to understand the implications of these and other governance decisions from the perspective of those who drive significant attention and revenue to these platforms – namely social media creators and influencers.

(In)visibility in the creator economy

It has been nearly two decades since cultural sociologist Angela McRobbie (2004) published a short treatise on a then-emergent economy powered not by material resources but, rather, by ideas. Although the "Everyone is Creative" title was a rhetorical provocation, this very assurance abounds in the so-called "creator economy"; only today, YouTubers, TikTokers, and Wanghong have superseded artists and designers. A 2021 report estimated that "tens of millions of people around the globe consider themselves creators"; the creator economy, moreover, has been ranked as the "fastest-growing type of small business" (Lorenz, 2021). Of course, the so-called "creator economy" is scarcely monolithic; rather, it is marked by widespread variance across platforms, creator subjectivities, content categories/genres, laboring practices, and income levels (e.g. Abidin,

2019; Arriagada and Ibáñez, 2020; Cunningham and Craig, 2019b; Duffy, 2017; Hesmondhalgh et al., 2019; Meisner and Ledbetter, 2022). To the latter point, both academic research and firsthand accounts from creators reveal marked disparities in the tiers of economic success. On YouTube, for instance, researchers estimate that the top 3% of channels receive 90% of the viewership (Bärtl, 2018). Meanwhile, leaked information about Twitch streamer income revealed that someone would need to rank in the "top 0.015% of all streamers" to achieve the current median household income (in the US) (D'Anastasio, 2021).

Statistics like these sharply defy the popular mythos of a social media-fashioned career – one wrought by the image of meritocratic success and the dazzling perks of entrepreneurialism. Indeed, critics have cast a spotlight on the less auspicious elements of platform-dependent creative labor: exploitation, insecurity, and a culture of overwork (Arriagada and Ibáñez, 2020; Glatt, 2022; Poell et al., 2021). Moreover, much like in traditional cultural industries, the inequities miring socially mediated creative careers are often structured by social hierarchies, including gender, sexuality, race, and class (Bishop, 2019; Duffy, 2017; Pham, 2015). According to the just-mentioned Twitch report, only 3 of the top 100 earners were women (D'Anastasio, 2021). Crowdsourced pay information supplied by influencers, meanwhile, reveals a considerable, race-based pay gap, with Black Instagram influencers receiving significantly lower rates than their white counterparts (Carman, 2020).

A key factor determining a creators' revenue – or lack thereof – is their degree of visibility, which is supported or thwarted by algorithmic systems (Bishop, 2019; O'Meara, 2019; Petre et al., 2019). Accordingly, several recently published studies examine how creators and influencers navigate the algorithmic systems of the platforms on which they create, circulate, and monetize cultural content (Bishop, 2020; Cotter, 2021; Cunningham and Craig, 2019a, 2019b; Duffy et al., 2021; Klawitter and Hargittai, 2018). Creative worker aspirants and professionals – much like ordinary users – rely upon shared communication to make sense of algorithms, which function as "contested objects whose meanings and interpretations are the subject of complex negotiations" (Natale, 2019). Crucially, as Bishop (2019) contends in her account of algorithmic "gossip," such discursive spaces help to lay bare the impact of platform bias and discrimination (p. 2590).

The earlier-mentioned accounts from creators point toward race- and sexuality-based inequalities in algorithmic governance. Recent scholarship on platformed sex work, moreover, reveals how systems of content moderation disproportionally target women (Are, 2021; van der Nagel and Tiidenberg, 2020). Against this backdrop, it seems essential to provide a more holistic account of marginalized creator communities' *interpretive understandings* and *experiential practices* with platform (in)visibility. As such, our study sought to bring together the experiences of various marginalized groups and platform communities to produce broader insight into the complex entanglements of power, identity, and (in)visibility within the creator economy.

Methods

This project draws upon in-depth interviews with 30 part- or full-time social media content creators (see Table 1 for participant details). Given recently published studies that

Table 1. Participant information.

Pseudonym	Genre	Platform(s)
Alec	Education	TikTok
Amber	Social justice	TikTok
Ariana	Politics	TikTok
Becca	Sex work	Instagram, TikTok, Twitter
Caroline	Trans lifestyle	TikTok
Carson	Drag, comedy	Instagram, TikTok
Catherine	Cosplay	TikTok
Connie	Craft	Instagram, TikTok
Courtney	Social justice	TikTok, Instagram
Diti	Music	TikTok
Donna	Cross-dressing	Instagram
Elyse	Comedy	TikTok
Eric	Art	Instagram
Eva	Alternative medicine	Instagram
Greg	Voice acting	TikTok
Isabella	Comedy, LGBTQ lifestyle	TikTok
Jackie	Dance	Instagram, TikTok
Jeet	Gaming	TikTok
Joy	Fashion, beauty	Instagram, TikTok
Lara	Boudoir photography	Instagram
Lea	Crystals/Alt healing	Instagram
Liberty	Cosplay and body positivity	Instagram
Liliana	Art	Instagram, TikTok
Lisa	Comedy	Instagram, Twitch
Nick	Art, politics	Instagram, TikTok
Rena	Cosplay	TikTok
Sabrina	Body positivity	Instagram, Twitter
Shane	Music	TikTok, YouTube
Tristan	Education	TikTok, YouTube
Warren	Comedy	TikTok

address creators' navigation of governance/moderation systems on *individual* platforms (e.g. Are, 2021; Caplan and Gillespie, 2020; Cotter, 2019; Kumar, 2019), we opted to recruit participants across a span of mainstream platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitch. Our recruitment efforts sought to identify creators willing to discuss their experiences with platform governance and regulation (e.g. censorship, demonetization, being locked out of one's account, shadowbans, or experiencing another form of algorithmic punishment). We relied upon three concurrent strategies to develop our initial recruitment list: (1) press coverage that identified individual creators; (2) platform-specific hashtags (e.g. #shadowbanned, #censored); and (3) a public call for participants shared on Reddit forums for current and aspiring creators.

We sampled overwhelmingly from historically marginalized social identities and/or stigmatized content genres. We acknowledge, of course, that "marginalization" is a fraught category that is deeply implicated in existing structures of power. As Clark-Parsons and Lingel (2020) offer, "Standard definitions of marginality can apply to anti-vaxxers, flat earthers, or nationalist extremists as much as feminist zinesters or drag queens" (p. 2). And, indeed, our first round of interviews revealed that a

range of creator-subjectivities feel unfairly targeted or aggrieved by platforms and their algorithms. As such, our second round of interviews focused more pointedly on creators from traditionally socially disadvantaged groups (people of color, women/non-binary, LGBTQ+, and those who routinely cover politicized issues within their content). During this phase, we were guided by terms and hashtags that emerged from our immersion on the platforms and spoke more centrally to identity/identification/marginalization (e.g. #TikTokhatesblackpeople, #Instagramissexist).

Interviews followed a semi-structured interview protocol; most lasted between 30 minutes and an hour. Participants received a stipend ($25 USD) in exchange for their time and insight, and interviews were sent to a professional service for transcription. From the transcripts, the study's authors developed the coding categories and applied focused codes to the dataset. Throughout the process, we followed a grounded theory approach, which involves linking "analysis and data collection that uses a systematically applied set of methods to generate an inductive theory about a substantive area" (Glaser, 1992: 16).

Findings: Mechanisms of (in)visibility

In chronicling their experiences as creators and influencers, our interview participants shared a sense that platforms' mechanisms of visibility were shrouded in ambiguity. Much like the sense-making efforts described in the aforementioned studies of platform-specific creator communities, interviewees reported a reliance on gossip and/or folk theories to make sense of "inscrutable" platform features and above all, the algorithms. While some combed through subreddits to – in Diti's words – "understand the algorithm a bit better," others relied upon Discord or Facebook groups. Greg thus recalled the "countless hours" he spent trying to "[learn] what works, and what sticks, and how to get engagement." Although he explained that TikTok's algorithm remains cloaked in mystery, such unpredictability at times played to creators' advantage, particularly when a post got an unexpected boost: "I found so many times that the content that you'd never expect, the content that doesn't follow the rules, the content that you really didn't put maybe much effort into, sometimes that's the content that goes viral.' Such mystique – that is, the inability to aptly predict what will "do well" – is ostensibly among the factors that furnish creative careers with such a seductive pull. Accordingly, Joy compared content creation to gambling:

> TikTok wants you to keep posting, keep posting, keep posting. And it's basically just luck. It just feels kind of like gambling. . . Maybe one of your videos goes viral. Maybe it doesn't. But if they shadowban you right after you go viral, it just makes you want it more. And it makes you keep being engaged in the app.

As Joy's mention of shadowbanning indicates, uncertainty about what types of content would be rendered *visible* were matched – and perhaps eclipsed – by a persistent fear of being made *invisible*. To the latter, participants discussed an array of platform punitive activities – from surreptitiously "concealed" content to images and video removed for alleged guideline violations.

In what follows, we attempt to systematize participants' sense-making of (in)visibility on and through platforms. We start by discussing a typology of (perceived) mechanisms of platform *invisibility*, including violations, bans, blocked accounts, and other punitive systems. We then turn our attention to creators' pursuit of *visibility* as rooted in experiential practice; here, we elucidate both anticipatory and reactive measures. As these typologies illustrate, creators' interpretive understandings of algorithms and platform governance were deeply implicated in their actions.

Platform invisibility: Violations, shadowbans, and bias

Interview participants chronicled a series of punitive measures enacted by platform companies, from being locked out of their professional accounts to witnessing swift, staggering declines in their metrics (i.e. being shadowbanned). Nearly all interviewees expressed some level of frustration at the mercurial nature of these platform punishments, but some highlighted the acute impact on their revenue streams. As Liliana noted of videos removed from her TikTok account:

> It kills me because I put so much work into these pieces. We all do, all of us creators, we put a lot of hours into these things. If one of my videos hit 100k in a day and I only got a dollar for that from TikTok, [then] I know that they're making a lot more money off me than I am from them.

Lea, similarly, after recalling how Instagram's algorithm seemed "triggered [to] limit her reach," admitted, "It's a very hard thing [to not understand visibility], and I'm hoping that my business will recover, but for a while there it was almost like they were killing my business."

Such quotes indicate that the nature and extent of penalties varied considerably. In trying to make sense of mechanisms used to limit their visibility, participants drew upon two schematics, which we have organized into the following typology (Figure 1). One dimension (x-axis) describes the punitive agent, be it a human (including platform decision-makers and content moderators) or machine (AI or algorithmically driven) actor. The other dimension (y-axis) illustrates an understanding that punishments could be enacted through either formal (i.e. explicitly communicated) or informal (speculative, not-explicitly communicated) means. To be sure, some of these categories overlap and/or exist on a spectrum; our decision to separate them is in part for analytical purchase.

Human-enacted bans and violations. The formal mechanisms of platform punishment identified by participants included flags, content removals, and suspended accounts – each of which varies in length, severity, and potential for recourse. Reflecting on his experiences with TikTok, Greg discussed the platform's "strike system," wherein users receive notification in the "account updates" section of their inbox (Spiller, 2021). As he shared:

> Every time I talk about a social issue, or a political issue, or race, or anything like that, 9 times out of 10, I'm getting a content violation. It happened all throughout the George Floyd era. [I sought to have] just an open, friendly, respectable discussion. That got a "strike."

	HUMAN ACTOR	MACHINE ACTOR
FORMAL MECHANISM	**Human-Enacted Bans and Violations**	**Automated Bans and Suspensions**
INFORMAL MECHANISM	**Bias and Discrimination**	**Shadowbans**

Figure 1. Typology of platforms' invisibility mechanisms.

Some of these punitive measures, such as platforms' reporting of community violations and responses to material "flagged" by audiences, were attributed to human actors: employees of the platform, human content moderators, and/or other users. For instance, in addressing the perceived lack of qualifications for those involved with the content moderation process, Nick questioned, "Who is the moderator?. . .What is the qualification for that? What is their agenda?" Eric, meanwhile, shared a belief that human actors – namely Instagram representatives – enter the moderation process to intervene in disputes: "Anytime that [Instagram takes] down an image, you get an alert and you're allowed to contest, which I do and win about half of the time because those are reviewed by humans."

Participants discussed the human agency of not only *platform* representatives, but also fellow *users* who allegedly "reported" content as a retaliatory practice. Courtney, for instance, recalled her experience of having videos "flag[ged]. . .for harassment and bullying or hate speech." Or, as Caroline noted, "I'm trans, so of course there's some transphobic people on TikTok that are gonna see my things and report me." As Caroline's comment makes clear, marginalized creator communities felt especially vulnerable to targeted – even concerted – attacks by other users.

Automated bans and suspensions. In other cases, the blame for formal bans was cast on platforms' (flawed) automated systems. While Courtney described TikTok as "a completely AI project," Elyse shared her perspective that "there's no rhyme or reason to what

gets taken down, what doesn't." According to Elyse, there's a "lack of human eyes going over reported content." Lisa, too, explained that the research she had done suggested that Instagram is moderated by "a machine – it's an algorithm." She added, "It's not real people reviewing the accounts and videos. It's mostly just a machine going through [the content]." To Tristan, TikTok's reliance on automated mechanisms of moderation was a key source of community violation sanctions:

> TikTok and a lot of these platforms. . .use loose community guidelines. . .but there's no specific examples, so they can apply these rules to literally anything. So, what happened is that everyone gets videos flagged for the most random stuff because it's an AI, an algorithm that determines if a video is suitable or not for their platform. . .

To this end, several of our participants furnished examples of faulty systems that "punished" them for content they perceived as well within the boundaries of acceptability. Sabrina, for instance, said that she had learned about a "bot that measures the skin to clothing ratio of a photo. [This] means the larger of a body you have, the more skin you are showing inherently." Jackie, meanwhile, shared an experience where her content – a video shared on TikTok of her holding a laundry basket of clothing, including underwear – was mis-appropriately identified as "nudity." Accounts such as these suggest that automated mechanisms of moderation are imperfect, at best; what unites them is that the punitive action was clearly communicated to user-creators.

Bias and discrimination. In other instances, participants detailed informal mechanisms of punishment, such as when their content was hidden or demoted, *without notification from the platform*. Much like the fraught allocation of agency in formal systems of governance, participants attributed these retaliatory measures to a combination of human and automated agents (Myers West, 2018; Savolainen, 2022). Liberty's exposition shows how some participants were keenly aware of this messy co-mingling:

> Anything that is countercultural to what is seen as okay within typical American society, there's a ban on it. And I understand that the algorithm isn't like well, "I don't think this person is sexy so I'm just going to ban them.". . . But the people who create the algorithms because of their cultural beliefs, they have a very specific world view about what is acceptable in terms of behavior and what is considered deviant and that directly affects how the algorithm is going to choose what they've seen more of.

In placing the onus on the "people who create the algorithms," Liberty foregrounds the perceived role of human bias in rendering creators – particularly those from marginalized communities – less visible. Liliana, similarly, told us that platforms "further marginaliz[e] people through their algorithms"; she reasoned, "because algorithms are built by people, and tech is still largely cis white male and they code their biases into the code."

Caroline, meanwhile, suggested that unabashed human bias and discrimination – particularly from those working inside the platform companies – configure their systems of governance. "I think that TikTok is actually transphobic. I really think that the people in charge are closed-minded," she shared. Isabella expressed a remarkably similar sentiment about TikTok's treatment of the queer community. She told us that, "Sometimes I

really do feel like I have no choice but to say like, 'TikTok is really preying on the downfall of a lot of creators of color and queer creators and trans creators.'" Other participants alleged that those working for platform companies exhibited racist attitudes that structured who gets seen – and how. As Diti remarked, "I don't wanna go to extremes and say a certain app is racist, but I do believe that they are promoting some creators over others based on racial identity and stuff." Such beliefs can be understood within the framework of algorithmic decoding wherein, as Lomborg and Kapsch (2020) note, "inferences about the intentions of the producer [are made]" that in turn are evaluated against "personal and socio-cultural spheres of living" (p. 748).

Shadowbans. Of all the invisibility mechanisms discussed throughout our interviews, few drew as much speculation and ire as shadowbans. As noted earlier, platforms consistently deny that they engage in this form of algorithmic punishments; many creators, meanwhile, have supplied ample anecdotes about these unannounced visibility penalties (Are, 2021; Cotter, 2021; Duffy et al., 2021; Petre et al., 2019; Savolainen, 2022). Sabrina tackled platforms' denial of the practice head-on:

> It feels like a lot of gaslighting from Instagram because they for years were saying, "Oh, we're not shadowbanning people. Oh, we're not banning certain hashtags." And right now, they say, "Oh, they're not limiting reach when you use certain words." You know, they don't acknowledge that they do that.

When asked to explain how somebody *knows* they have been shadowbanned, Liberty said, "Your engagement goes down" and you learn that "people were not seeing my posts, even people that follow me." Noting the informality of the punishment, Lea offered, "You don't get like a letter or an email saying that you're shadowbanned. All of a sudden, your reach just drops, and you don't show up in searches." Amber explained how the threat of shadowbanning looms large, especially for marginalized creator communities:

> It's very demeaning. It feels caricature-like to use black creators for making dances and popularizing songs, but not allowing them to participate in any form of social activism for fear of being shadowbanned because for some really popular creators, this is their livelihood.

Not only do these examples reaffirm what Cotter (2021) usefully describes as platforms' "position of epistemic authority," but they reveal a staggeringly uneven punitive system that is especially detrimental to voices outside of the mainstream.

Creator visibility: Censorship, circumvention, and uneven rewards

At the same time that participants' understandings of algorithmic governance were structured through the threat of platform invisibility, their creative practices were fundamentally oriented toward the visibility ideal. Four distinct but related experiential practices related to visibility emerged from the interviews: *suppression*, *experimentation*, *circumvention*, and *resignation*. In what follows, we explain how these practices (Figure 2) varied across level of platform compliance (i.e. compliant vs resistant) and temporality (i.e. anticipatory, or before moderation, vs reactive, or after moderation).

	COMPLIANT	RESISTANT
ANTICIPATORY	**Suppression**	**Experimentation**
REACTIVE	**Resignation**	**Circumvention**

Figure 2. Typology of creators' visibility practices.

Suppression. In preparing to circulate their content, many creators recounted instances of self-censorship spurred by perceived algorithmic recommendation systems. Indeed, part of the frustration surrounding platform in(visibility) stems from the confusion around the ways creators ought to ensure their content was algorithm-friendly. Elyse said, "There's no clear guidelines [about] what is okay content to post and what is not. And the rules are haphazardly applied to some creators and not to others." This uneven application of community guidelines – enforced by machine learning algorithms – left many creators feeling like their content was not desirable to platforms like TikTok. Rena, a cosplayer on TikTok, said, "The algorithm does not support cosplayers and original content creators. It very much boosts trends, good and bad." For creators whose content deviates from popular trends, content suppression is akin to defensive containment.

In many cases, creators' past experiences with automated penalties prompted a logic of risk aversion. Isabella, a transgender creator who produces comedy videos on TikTok, described this feeling of anticipatory anxiety:

> Every time I make a video about the gay community or the trans community or whatever, I kind of feel like. . .I have to walk on eggshells because the chances of it getting taken down are so high. . .[meanwhile] I have watched straight man after straight man post hideously homophobic videos with millions of views. . ..

This unequal enforcement of community guidelines – from platforms purporting to curb harassment and improve inclusivity – directly shapes creators' concerns about the type of content they should post, forcing a double-bind of self-censorship or swift punishments.

Beyond considering how *content* decisions may garner visibility, creators also considered the potential impact of their expressly communicated *identities*. Jackie, an Asian woman who posts dance videos to TikTok, was cautioned about labeling her post with an ethnic identification. She said, "I did have someone ask me if I use the hashtag 'AsianWomen' because they told me not to [use it]. They said that one was often shadowbanned." Guided by her past frustrations with the TikTok algorithm, Amber similarly advised, "If you create hashtags on your post, Black is not a hashtag that you can use. But any other color is possible. So, from there, I knew I would have some struggles creating content." For Black creators, posting about social justice issues that affect people of color proved especially challenging. Connie shared that "TikTok has been shadowbanning Black creators and anyone that mentions Black Lives Matter." She continued, "It's kind of scary to think about the implications." Taken together, social media creators seemed to rely upon various suppression strategies to position their content – and themselves – as marketable commodities sanitized for mass consumption.

Experimentation. In their pursuit of platform visibility, creators shared how they were aggrieved by what they considered a profoundly uneven allocation of visibility. Some of this frustration emerged from acts of *ad hoc* experimentation and comparison. For example, Becca is a member of a Discord group for sex workers who share advice and professionalization resources with each other. She explained:

> That [Discord] group has a link on Google that you can upload your images there, and it'll tell you the likelihood of it being flagged as nudity or adult content. So, we actually have this thing where you can like run your images by it, and it'll tell you the likelihood of it being flagged by the algorithm.

You can find this tool here.

In other cases, mundane creative practices inadvertently yielded comparative data. Jeet remarked on an unexpected metric boost that corresponded with the lightening of his hair color. He shared with us:

> I actually ended up bleaching my [naturally dark] hair on a bet sort of thing. And I realized nearly instantaneously that as soon as I had bleached hair, my For You [page, which allows TikTok audiences to see new content] push went further along. Now, that could be due to a numerous amount of other factors. Maybe my content was generally just better. Maybe that's not exactly on the algorithm, but as soon as I bleached my hair, my content got pushed forward. . ..

While Jeet's story demonstrates how informal experimentation was used as evidence to document changes in performance, other creators engaged in on-the-spot comparisons with those posting remarkably similar content. Rena, in fact, noted how TikTok's "double standards with the community guidelines" revealed the platforms' favoritism toward

"bigger creators." She especially chastised TikTok for allowing creators with large followings "to get away with things versus smaller creators being blamed."

Caroline, a transgender creator, detailed an experience on TikTok in which one of her posts was taken down. Shortly after being censored, she saw a highly popular creator make an egregious violation against community guidelines, and it was not moderated by TikTok. Reflecting on this experience, Caroline said, "It's so frustrating. . .I think that if you're a male, and you're white, and you're straight, and you're cis, you can basically do anything on TikTok and get away with it." For many creators in this study, the practice of experimental comparisons – and crucially, the knowledge about platform visibility gained from them – contributed to wider valuations of algorithmic systems.

Circumvention. Through a variety of experiences – from past punishments to the advice circulating in informal peer networks – social media creators learn the ropes of platforms' mechanisms of (in)visibility. In hopes of evading future *punishment*, the creators we interviewed discussed efforts to circumvent the automated detection of potentially sensitive content. Strategic and clever workarounds were considered especially useful for navigating commonly policed language, content, and practices (see, e.g. Gerrard, 2018). Using platforms' community guidelines as benchmarks, creators engaged in circumvention to resist algorithmic *detection*, while still acknowledging the necessity of algorithmic visibility in their success on social media.

In many cases, creators deployed linguistic signals that would send coded messages to viewers "in the know," while simultaneously avoiding content policing – be it from platforms or antagonistic audiences. This practice is similar to what Marwick and Boyd (2014) termed *social steganography*, or the process by which social media users encoded private messages intended only for certain audiences in content that was circulated publicly. For creators, though, circumvention was not performed for fear of private information becoming publicly available; rather, circumvention allowed creators to send messages without fear of automated punishments. For example, Caroline explained, "I know that no one can write 'sex,' so we write it like S-E-G-G-S." Sabrina also concealed her complaints about the nature of algorithmic policing on TikTok; instead of writing the word "algorithm" on a post, she wrote "Al Gore rhythm" in a message to followers. Although these practices may seem innocuous on the surface, they speak to larger conditions of circumvention *necessary* for creators to pursue visibility and, ultimately, success on social media.

Furthermore, creators attempted to circumvent platform policing by limiting the presence of text-based content. Amber thus explained her decision to "remove words from our bio [and change] the hashtags I used." "By not auto-generating captions," she hypothesized, "TikTok wouldn't automatically pick up what key words I might be using." To this end, the expanded means of communication between creators and audiences – achieved in part by a steady cycle of newly launched features – were framed as opportunities for surveillance and policing, rather than connection and sharing. Whereas Amber resisted policing *within* the app environment, others re-directed audiences to external sites. Becca thus urged her audience on TikTok to follow her web presence on other sites – like Twitter, which she described as the "wild west" of social media – that are more friendly to sex workers like herself. She explained:

> I have all my links on my Twitter since we can post pretty much anything there. And I tell people when they say, "Oh, what websites are you on?" I say, "Well, go look at my Twitter." That's what I tell people on TikTok or Instagram because I'm scared that if I post a link to my OnlyFans, that they're going to take it down.

Although it is tempting to reflect on circumvention as a creative *accomplishment*, we wish to draw attention to the immaterial labor undertaken by content creators who use circumvention to sustain their livelihoods – which otherwise could be dismantled by small infractions that lead to cascading consequences.

Resignation. Finally, some creators seemed to submit to the precarity of platform algorithms, often becoming resigned after investing considerable time and energy in the navigation of punitive measures. In the context of consumer data surveillance, Draper and Turow (2019) define digital resignation as "a rational emotional response in the face of undesirable situations that individuals believe they cannot combat" (p. 1828). Among the creators in our study, resignation represented a marked departure from the guiding logics of visibility and, conversely, invisibility.

Liliana, a non-binary artist whose content is frequently censored on TikTok and Instagram, confessed to feeling overwhelmed by the intense laboring demands associated with promotion of their creative work. Indeed, Liliana discussed their frustration with "the nitty-gritty, real back-breaking stuff that you have to do on social media to get your engagement and growth up." They added, "They really want you to put your entire self on their platform. They want you to do the stories, they want you to do the reels, they want you to tweet constantly, they want you to post multiple times a day." Even for creators willing to educate themselves on how to succeed amid platform algorithms, this unpaid, supplementary labor to their creative pursuits does not guarantee desired outcomes. Beleaguered at the lack of results from following advice of seasoned creators, Joy said, "I consistently post. I plan ahead. I make videos ahead of time. But it just seems like white content creators tend to do a lot better." Diti expressed similar concerns. She explained, "You're sort of throwing something at a wall and seeing if it'll stick. . .and I guess things are sticking a lot better if you're a pretty white person over a person of color."

This feeling of giving in to the "court of algorithmic opinion" (Hallinan and Striphas, 2016) was resonant for other interviewees across social identity categories. When asked whether TikTok allows space for discussions about racial tensions in the United States, Greg reflected:

> I would say there's a space for it. I would say the space is uncomfortable. I would say the space is not furnished. I would say the space has no AC. It's a space, but is it a space you wanna be in? You know what I mean? And that's just how I feel about it. You take the risk. If you're gonna use your platform for anything like that, you take the risk of being penalized for it. And so, I've kind of learned to just kind of curtail that, and not even really try anymore.

To Greg, the potential blowback from politicized communication – in the form of "penalt[ies]" from TikTok – led him to eschew visibility as a structuring orientation. Isabella, who we noted earlier shared her belief about Tiktok's presumed "preying on

the downfall of a lot of creators of color and queer creators and trans creators," contrasted this with what she considered the platform's favoritism toward "conservative creators": "They. . . say a lot. . .If there's one thing that conservatives are gonna be. . . it's loud."

Creators' frustrations related to resignation were not only directed at the ideologies underlying platform algorithms but also at the perceived fatalistic nature of visibility. Lea shared:

> I can tell that within like – especially on the posts, I can tell within like the first minutes if my post is gonna make it and become a popular post or not. It's like predetermined, almost, as soon as you post it. Like once they see the content, like whether you're gonna get any reach or not.

In other words, Lea felt that her interpretive agency was minimized by the perverse power of Instagram's algorithm.

Conclusion: Discipline and punish(ment)?

The creator economy is – much like the cluster of "traditional" cultural industries that preceded it – a highly vaunted career destination. In circulating discourses of entrepreneurial, self-expressive, and potentially lucrative careers, mainstream social media platforms both contribute to, and benefit from, the promise of digitally enabled "dream jobs." While TikTok's creator marketplace is pitched as a space for "innovative video creators [to] collaborate. . .on paid campaigns," the Instagram for Creators page promises future creators that they can "be [themselves] and the fans will follow." But such statements gloss over a far less auspicious reality, namely that the social media economy is marked by inequality, exploitation, and a pervasive culture of overwork (Bishop, 2019; Duffy, 2017; Glatt, 2022). Creators' careers are, moreover, both shaped – and constrained by – the affordances of the platforms on which they produce and circulate content (Meisner and Ledbetter, 2022).

In this paper, we have examined how creators' orientation toward platform (in)visibility – and the wider systems of regulation and governance – structure their experiences, creative processes, and cultural products (i.e. content). In foregrounding the experiences of marginalized creators, we call attention to shared understandings that platform companies allocate visibility is ways deemed inconsistent and often quite biased. Many of our interview participants thus described being unfairly targeted by both formal and informal punishments – from account suspensions and content violations to shadowbans. Crucially, though, concerns about platform punishments were matched by collective perceptions about *who* gets rewarded. According to our interviewees, mainstream voices and content genres deemed normative seemed to evade the punitive apparatuses that others are socialized to fear. Not only do such understandings reveal the power imbalances between platforms and cultural producers (Baym, 2018), but they also testify to the role of platforms as moral arbiters (Petre et al., 2019; see also, Are, 2021; Cotter, 2021).

We acknowledge, of course, that creators' sense-making of rewards and punishments is not necessarily the same as the actual enactments of platform companies. However, in line with writings on "algorithmic imaginaries" (Bucher, 2017), "algorithmic gossip"

(Bishop, 2020) and "perceptions of [platform] fairness" (Caplan and Gillespie, 2020), we take seriously creators' perceptions; after all, these individual and collective understandings are deeply implicated in their *practices*. It was, for example, through impromptu experiments and comparisons that creators learned about ostensibly favored types of content and subjectivities; these ideas, in turn, structured the types of content they created or eschewed.

To this end, we encourage future insight into how platforms' treatment of creators can be understood within a framework of institutional power, wherein governance takes place through processes of discipline and "normalization" (Foucault, 1977). Indeed, the typologies we described above – namely perceived mechanisms of platform visibility and creator practices – could perhaps be reframed as platform *punishments* and expressions of creator *discipline*. This framework is, of course, an explicit invocation of Foucault's (1977) treatment of institutional power. And though the metaphor of *discipline and punish*(ment) may be imperfect, we encourage researchers to consider not just user behaviors (e.g. Bucher, 2012), but also cultural production activities within such a framework of governmentality and surveillance.

While those in our sample deployed various practices to navigate platform governance, perhaps the most concerning was a sense of resignment. Resignment to the expectations and perceived desires of platforms – as enforced by algorithms and other in(visibility) mechanisms – requires creators to orient themselves to production and promotion strategies that will ostensibly render them palatable for mass consumption (Bishop, 2021). In considering how platforms seemingly favor normative subjectivities and de-politicized content genres, it seems critical to consider how to nourish a "creator economy" that is less intimately guided by mechanisms of discipline and punishment.

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