ALGOSPEAK AND ALGO-DESIGN IN PLATFORMED BOOK PUBLISHING: REVOLUTIONARY CREATIVE TACTICS IN DIGITAL PARATEXT TO CIRCUMVENT CONTENT MODERATION

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Introduction

This paper examines the rise of algo-design in the context of platformed book publishing. Building on conceptualizations of algospeak, a strategy that involves creating code words or phrases to create a brand-safe lexicon, I theorize algo-design as a broader creative strategy used by online creators that involves using and avoiding specific language *and* visuals to evade content moderation by platforms. Specifically, this research explores the use of algo-design in the paratext of romance and erotica novels by authors of color and LGBTQIA authors who publish their fiction on digital publishing platforms, such as Amazon, and market them on social media platforms. I argue that, in many cases, algo-design is a revolutionary creative tactic for BIPOC and LGBTQIA authors of romance fiction, who are disproportionately affected by content moderation systems (Monea, 2022) and often have their works flagged as adult material due to the genre's tendency to include intimate relationships (Parnell, 2021). The use of algo-design by authors is a clear effort to push back against bluntly imposed content moderation interventions and subvert platform power.

Digital Paratext as Sites of Moderation

This research focuses on content moderation of digital book paratext. Paratext refers to the materials surrounding the text of a book, which act as a "threshold", without any clear boundaries, "between the inside and the outside" of a text (Genette, 1997, 2). Paratextual elements, including the title, author's name, cover, description, preface, categories and so on, inevitably influence the reading of a text and contribute to positioning books within certain genres. In the context of digital publishing, paratext also serves as important metadata for platforms to organize and moderate content. On Amazon, for instance, category, descriptions, keywords, and other paratext undergo moderation before a book is published or made available online. These metadata, as

well as author names, are also used to sort books into a network of related titles, which in turn affects discoverability mechanisms such as search results, also-bought recommendations, and bestseller lists. Paratexts thus serve a dual purpose in the platform ecosystem, as interpretive thresholds for readers and descriptive metadata for platform algorithms. The visibility of descriptive forms of metadata as paratext on book publishing platforms makes it a heuristic avenue to investigate the ways in which metadata, in contrast to the actual media content, is subject to content moderation. What kinds of paratext are being moderated by platforms and how are authors creatively opposing moderation?

Method

This exploratory research brings together platform and publishing studies to account for both the technological contexts and genre histories in which books are produced, sold and consumed through platforms. It follows a bifurcated approach to theorizing and mapping algo-design: first, it tracks instances of content moderation of book paratext; and second, it looks at examples of paratext design that is intended to evade content moderation algorithms, or at least responsive to algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2017). It is based on empirical data from in-depth interviews with fourteen authors, focusing on their experiences of and "stories about algorithms" (Schellewald, 2022), as well as metadata and paratext analysis. The results do not provide a generalizable survey of content moderation on platforms, rather they reveal instances in which moderation occurs and provide a foundation for future research.

Findings

Several authors reported being propelled to change language in their book titles and descriptions on Amazon in response to moderation outcomes. One author decided to change the title of her debut novel to remove the phrase *One Night Stand* after Facebook's automatic detection software interpreted the original title as mature content and banned the book from being advertised on the platform. Another author stated that when she tried updating the product descriptions of her books, the word 'erotica' and the flame emoji were flagged by Amazon as keywords that violated community guidelines. Some authors reported that they will avoid tagging their work as 'erotica' on Amazon, even if it fits within this subgenre, because doing so often results in the book being removed from the site, prevented from being published in the first place, or algorithmically suppressed in the platform's marketplace – a fate referred to by authors publishing and selling their books on Amazon as being relegated to "Amazon's dungeon," or "dungeoned."

Other authors reported that terms relating to queer identities, including 'queer' and 'bisexual', were also flagged by Amazon's content moderation system, providing further evidence that demonstrates platform restrictions of adult content particularly impact people from marginalized groups, including LGBTQIA+ people (especially queer people of color), gender nonconforming folks, and kink communities who often use digital networks for sexual self-expression, community and knowledge (Bronstein, 2020; Sundén et al., 2020). Algospeak and algo-design is thus an important tactic for

LGBTQIA creators whose sexualities are often deemed as unsafe or adult content by platform governance systems, as seen in this context.

Finally, some authors reported that design elements on book covers had also been flagged by Amazon's content moderation system and prevented from being published on the platform. In one instance, the cover featured a black and white photo-style image of a Black woman bordered by a red, Christmas-themed background. The woman in the image has bare shoulders, but her torso and legs are covered by a white sheet. Despite the minimal nudity, Amazon's automatic detection software prevented the book from being published, deeming that the cover contained adult materials. The author appealed the decision with Amazon's author services and although the book was eventually published on Amazon, it has been suppressed from appearing in the search results, limiting its discoverability and sales potential. Other authors changed cover designs to avoid this technological suppression.

Conclusion

Alternative phrases, double entendres and obfuscated design are not new to the paratext and marketing materials of romance and erotica, but they have become necessary algo-design strategies on publishing platforms that impose increasingly strict policies regarding adult materials. The instances of moderation described above indicate the extent to which romance fiction is getting caught up in the de-platformization of sex on social media platforms, which became widespread on several U.S.-based platforms after the implementation of FOSTA (Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act) and SESTA (Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act) laws in 2018 (Tiidenberg & van der Nagel, 2020). Although Amazon and Facebook's moderation systems clearly explicitly target sexual content and adult material, it is nearly impossible for authors and publishers to know what constitutes violations except through trial and error. Even then, moderation outcomes are often wildly inconsistent, affecting some authors more than others. BIPOC and queer authors are particularly affected by these systems, as their identities and work are often flagged as adult or unsafe materials, further compounding the historical marginalization they have experienced in the traditional publishing industry. For these authors, creative choices intended to circumvent platform moderation may be thought of as micro creative revolutions against conservative corporate governance systems. This research calls for more sustained investigations into the relationship between paratext (and metadata), moderation and responsive tactics by creators across cultural industries as well as how these practices are shaping genre conventions of media texts.

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