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## **STRATEGIC (IN)VISIBILITY: HOW MARGINALISED CREATORS NAVIGATE THE RISKS AND CONSTRAINTS OF ONLINE VISIBILITY**

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Online creators need their content to be 'seen'; visibility on platforms can provide financial, social, and representational benefits (Poell et al., 2021). The creator economy relies on 'popularity metrics', such as likes, shares, comments, views, and subscriptions to prove and monetize a creator's success (Glatt, 2022; García-Rapp, 2017). A lot of vital research has been done on how creators try to enhance their visibility on platforms and struggle with the threat of invisibility, finding that creators have to engage in 'visibility games' (Cotter, 2019), share 'algorithmic gossip' about the best techniques to game the algorithm (Bishop, 2019), develop folk theories to get more views (Glatt, 2022), and skirt moderation practices (Myers West, 2018) in order to thrive in their field.

Still, especially for marginalised creators, platformised visibility is not without its costs: harassment, threats, and stigmatisation (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016), risks of de-platforming and related loss of income (Are & Briggs, 2023) are commonplace for these workers. Being visible does not equal being safe - either from platforms or from fellow users (Myers West, 2018). Online and offline hegemonic norms have also simultaneously invisibilized and hypervisibilized marginalised groups. Previous research has demonstrated how opportunities and harms are institutionalised and distributed through platform algorithms and moderation practices (e.g., Cotter, 2019; Southerton et al., 2020). For instance, celebrity users are not just afforded more protection, but also more wiggle room in relation to platform rules (Are & Paasonen, 2021; Oversight Board, 2022). Clearly, therefore, harms can be perpetrated by both users and platform processes and infrastructures (Schoenebeck & Blackwell, 2021). In light of these

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concerns, this paper examines how marginalised creators manage (in)visibility across platforms.

### **Hegemonic standards, platforms, and visibility**

Pursuing this line of inquiry, we build on a rich literature on how hegemonic standards render the identities, bodies and representations of marginalised groups simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible. Levels of visibility set apart socially marginalised groups as 'Other' in contrast to a norm, e.g.: Black people are simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible as diverging from a normative whiteness (Fanon, 1967, pp. 115–116), and fat people receive intense social scrutiny while also being marginalised through their erasure from mainstream discourse and opportunities (Gailey, 2014, p. 7). Dominant norms and identities are positively invisibilized through 'universal' acceptance, but deviation from these norms is simultaneously marked and erased for its 'difference'.

Online such social structures not only persist, but are further institutionalised through platform affordances. Ranking algorithms have, for example, made Black women at once hypervisible as sexually available, while rendering their actual interests and representations invisible (Noble, 2013, p. 5). On social media, algorithmic recommendation systems render fat bodies invisible, or overexpose fat people to hate (Cotter, 2022). Platform moderation practices limit the representations of minority sexualities, precisely by a hyper-focus on femme, queer, sex working, disabled and fat bodies (Are, 2020; Coombes et al., 2022; Southerton et al., 2020). Online sex workers are banned from platforms, yet also subjected to intense online surveillance (Blunt & Wolf, 2020, p. 121; Sanders et al., 2018, p. 109). As such, platform design and decisions reinforce hegemonic standards. The hyper/invisibility of marginalised groups, through for instance algorithmic recommendation and moderation systems has been platformised.

Faced with dangers of overexposure, surveillance, and deplatforming while simultaneously trying to build an audience, creators may find themselves having to constantly balance the potential risks and benefits of platform visibility. Examining this balancing act, this paper addresses the following research questions: What are the tactics creators employ to limit their visibility and its associated risks? How do they minimise the harms that come with their hypervisibility as marginalised creators?

### **Methodology**

Drawing on 27 interviews with creators – online sex workers, LGBTQ+ activists, sex educators – we outline the harms of hypervisibility and users' tactics for strategic invisibility. More specifically, the analysis builds on a set of 15 in-depth interviews with European adult webcam performers and 12 interviews with content creators posting sex work, LGBTQ+ expression, journalism, activism, and sex education. These sets of interviews originate from two projects with different foci: 1) webcam performers' online working environments, and 2) potential links between networked harassment and deplatforming. Using thematic analysis, we identified and stigmatized how the interviewed creators manage visibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In combination, this analysis provides a comprehensive perspective on how a wide range of stigmatized creators navigate

risks of hypervisibility and stigmatization, while simultaneously trying to remain visible and make a living.

By understanding online sex workers as creators and sexual content as cultural content, we explicitly aim to broaden the notion of the creator. Treating online sex workers as distinct would be to perpetuate their stigmatization and sex exceptionalism (Nayar, 2021). Instead, the aim is to promote networks of solidarity across the wide variety of often precarious, platform-based content creators.

### **Risks and strategies of (in)visibility**

Three key themes emerged from our interviews. First, in addition to the extensively discussed risks of creator invisibility (e.g., Duffy & Meisner, 2022), we found that hypervisibility can also pose a substantial risk to marginalised creators. The interviewees describe the harassment, stigmatisation, surveillance, and prosecution their (hyper)visibility at times brings along. Hence, platform visibility needs to be understood as ambiguous.

Second, the interviewed creators outline tactics for critically managing their platform visibility. Within platform constraints, they add risk management techniques to their 'visibility games' (Cotter, 2019). They ignore or counter harassment, circumvent surveillance, and manage stigma. As marginalised creators they are often aware of the heightened scrutiny they face from platforms and audiences. Pre-emptive risk management techniques help alleviate some of the burden of hypervisibility.

Third, creators at times also lean into invisibility. Our interviewees tactically attempt to keep elements of their personalities, personal lives, spaces, and embodiments invisible for a variety of reasons. Some creators explain how, contrary to logics of growth, they do not try to maximise their audience reach, but rather focus on the quality of their audience.

Taken together, our analysis suggests that we need to broaden the inquiry into regimes of visibility in the creator economy. The challenge is not just to gain insight into how creators maximise visibility, but also into how they seek particular types of visibility, as well as strategic invisibility

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