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QUEER DIGITAL LIVES: UNDERSTANDING DATAFICATION THROUGH CREATIVE COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES

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From bathroom stalls to airport security, surveillance practices are ubiquitous; whether deployed to control and suppress more fluid conceptions of gender (Costanza-Chock, 2020) or reinforce white supremacy (Browne, 2015), surveillance is key to the experience of contemporary life. Surveillance has only grown more complex in digital spaces where, under surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), databases, facial recognition systems, and automated forms of identity verification are pervasive. Datafication and surveillance are thus key concerns, particularly for marginalized groups (Hintz et al., 2018). In this research project, we specifically consider how queer individuals experience datafication and surveillance in their daily life and how they respond to it.

As documented in the literature, datafication enforces visibility, understood as "the logic of contemporary digital life and its requirements to be seen" (Talvitie-Lamberg et al., 2022). Vulnerable societal groups, such as the unemployed, undocumented, and older people studied by Talvitie-Lamberg et al. (2022), experience data-driven technologies as requiring them to negotiate how visible they are, to the platforms and to other users; they do this through "tactics of invisibility", which allow them to exert some agency and resist the datafied gaze (Talvitie-Lamberg et al., 2022). However, for LGBTQ communities, visibility is even more complex: it can serve to provide public recognition to queer and trans people, help build communities and strengthen solidarity, but can also expose individuals to abuse, harassment and surveillance (Kitzie, 2019; Lingel, 2021). Scholars have proposed to address this tension surrounding queer visibilities by proposing tactics of hypervisibility, such as dazzle camouflage (Lingel, 2021) and drag as obfuscation (Kornstein, 2019). Reflecting on the nexus of visibility, invisibility and

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hypervisibility, in our research we address how queer people conceptualize surveillance and datafication in their daily lives, how they interact with these systems, and what tactics they deploy to negotiate their interactions.

The research project

Grounded in a participatory action research (PAR) framework and utilizing focus groups with queer/LGBTQ+ participants from Glasgow (UK), our project examines how queerness is objectified, datafied, and surveilled in online spaces. Employing a critical, curious, and collaborative approach, the study treats community members as experts. The project includes three focus groups and a workshop with the same group of five participants over a three-month period, exploring intersections of queerness, safety, expression, and surveillance online. In the first session, the research team invited participants to think about datafication through a "data diary", through which they mapped out the various systems, locations, devices, and routines that are connected to data and data collection in their lives. In the second session, participants read two media articles on the topic of Instagram shadowbanning and Facebook's “real name” policy and discussed the tension between safety and visibility for queer communities. The third session is a visual focus group (Ferrari, 2024), in which participants came together to draw an image that represents their collective vision of a queer, safe, and regenerative internet. The last session was devoted to a zine-making workshop, which was informed by a discussion of our preliminary findings and resulted in different zines.

Findings

In this paper, we focus on the findings emerging from the first two sessions. First, participants are acutely aware of how much digital data they generated over the course of a typical day and of how such data is collected by different corporate actors to maximize their profits. This profit-driven datafication coexists with what participants see as a structural inability to “opt-out” of data collection, because “giving up” data is increasingly tied to financial incentives – chiefly the possibility of saving (even small amounts of) money in the sharp cost of living crisis that characterizes the UK at present. Participants discussed how “opting out” felt increasingly unrealistic; they remarked on how much this data collection renders them heavily visible online and specifically highly visible as queer. They expressed a shared need to hold different “presentations of the self” in different online contexts, to seek community or to ensure safety, but also delineated how queerness troubles the distinction between visibility and invisibility online and the oft-repeated idea that “if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear”.

Second, participants reflected on two paradoxes they encounter in their use of corporate digital platforms. As mentioned, this discussion was facilitated by two media articles that covered two phenomena, which have already been explored by scholars (see Rauchberg, 2022; Lingel, 2017): the shadowbanning of queer content on Instagram and the issues with Facebook’s real name policy. The first paradox lies in how the enactment of safety policies by corporate digital platforms renders queer communities more visible, but not safer. One example of this is verification requirements, which are aimed at enhancing safety in digital spaces by linking user accounts to their "real" identities (boyd, 2012). Participants noted how the policy

privileged the concept of permanency and how, by making the process of name change difficult, it universalizes the importance of permanent names, which is not necessarily shared across all communities. The second paradox concerns how these platforms have become a crucial stage for the development of queer knowledge (Haimson et al., 2019; Willcox and Hickey-Moody, 2020), while also “extracting” this knowledge (Guyan, 2023). Participants often found this to be confusing and ironic; many listed the ways that being queer while navigating data systems was hard, yet remarked how the platforms connected to these systems are also sites of connection and belonging.

But participants also shared their own experiences in trying to navigate these paradoxes and spent time examining the various ways in which they set boundaries in the digital world in order to protect their space, health, and the balance between their online/offline selves. These tactics included: posting Instagram stories visible only to their carefully curated list of “Close Friends” (as enabled by the platform); creating Finstas, i.e. separate Instagram accounts through which they can post more authentic content and manage “context collapse” (Marwick & boyd, 2011); removing tags and followers; using pronoun markers in some platforms but not others; and divesting from the use of Facebook. While participants generally felt the need to engage in these “tactics of invisibility”, many of them had not thought about these practices as connected to navigating datafication until our focus groups made them realize this connection.

The sessions revealed that participants spent a lot of time and labour considering how to navigate different modalities of visibility, as being "seen" or represented was not an inherent "good" and how and why and when they wanted to be perceived (intentionally or not) changed depending on audience and platform context. This participant-led focus inspired a concept we have preliminary named “digitally afforded lateral surveillance” and by which we highlight how participants feel primarily surveilled online by their peers, via read receipts, shared locations, tagging, “@” functions, etc. This is enabled through corporate data extraction, of course, but holds different risks, contradictions, and meanings for the participants, especially when they "logged off" and dealt with these reverberations in their offline lives.

Further, while participants couldn’t exactly pinpoint where they had learned these tactics, they reported having seen them adopted by the queer communities they interact with online. This speaks to the existence of processes of inter-community knowledge sharing (see also Geeng et al. 2022). Overall, the focus groups homed in on how peer and corporate data surveillance, along with awareness of these practices, leads queer communities to develop tactics to negotiate visibility and privacy in online spaces.

Conclusion

Through a participatory action research (PAR) lens, our work centres the voices and lived expertise of LGBTQ+ community members and delves into the tensions around visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility, illuminating how queer individuals navigate these dynamics and employ tactics to negotiate their digital interactions. By adopting a collaborative approach, we not only document these experiences but also invite participants to co-create knowledge about datafication and surveillance, with the aim of empowering them in their day-to-day encounters with digital technologies. Finally, we

argue that dataveillance is a queer issue. Investigating daily practices and imaginaries through this frame offers a vital perspective from which to study datafication at large.

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