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BEING SEEN AND LOOKING BACK: MANDATORY ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF SURVEILLANCE FOR LGBTQ+ USERS

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The ubiquity of digital platforms and social media permeates social, economic, and political life, making participation nearly unavoidable (Van Dijck, Poell & de Waal, 2018; Steinberg, 2019). From maintaining relationships to accessing services and organizing events, our interactions are increasingly mediated through these platforms. This platformization is driven by datafication, rendering user activities visible, recorded, and commodified for corporate profit (Myers West, 2019).

Datafication has blurred the line between publicness and privacy. Even when users perceive their social media engagement as private, they enact public personas subject to scrutiny (Baym & boyd, 2012). This visibility enables digitally mediated surveillance beyond commercial aims, as data is used to monitor workers and track political activists due to their social media activity (Fuchs et al., 2012; Zuboff, 2015).

These concerns reflect a growing interest in data justice, which connects data collection practices to broader social justice issues beyond individual privacy (Taylor, 2017; Dencik & Sanchez-Monedero, 2022). Scholars urge us to navigate a data-driven world while identifying ways to redress its inherent issues. Yet, I argue that resistance to datafication is not merely emerging but an integral part of how LGBTQ+ users interact with technology.

LGBTQ+ users occupy a paradoxical position: social media is vital for identity exploration (Pullen, 2010), public persona development (Bromseth & Sundén, 2011), community building, and urban space occupation (Duguay et al., 2023). However, they also face disproportionate algorithmic surveillance, including demonetization, content deletion, shadowbanning, and account suspension (Are & Briggs, 2023; Bivens & Haimson, 2016; Duffy & Meisner, 2023).

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This presentation, part of a broader PhD project, analyzes how LGBTQ+ users in Montréal and Berlin navigate algorithms and AI in digital spaces (Podmore, 2021; Huneke, 2022). Based on qualitative interviews, this study examines how LGBTQ+ users' technological knowledge shapes their online behaviour (Bishop, 2019; Duguay, 2020). This project's comparative dimension addresses calls to decentralize Europe and North America as generalizable case studies, recognizing that sociocultural, economic, and political factors shape digital phenomena (Matassi & Boczkowski, 2021). More broadly, this research explores the impacts of algorithms and AI on queer expression, including censorship and favoring mainstream identities.

This project engages with scholarship on folk theories of platformization (Helmond, 2015; Cho, 2018; DeVito, 2021; Poell, Nieborg & Duffy, 2021; Bishop, 2023) and algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2017; Richter & Ye, 2023; van der Nagel, 2021). It also contributes to queer digital studies, emphasizing the continuity of LGBTQ+ users' technological marginalization (McKinney, 2020; Gray, 2009). While platformization amplifies these issues, LGBTQ+ users' historical engagement with technology has fostered pragmatic expectations of discrimination and adaptive resistance strategies (Robards et al., 2018).

Methods

The presentation is based on 24 qualitative interviews conducted in Montréal and Berlin between October 2023 and July 2024 with cultural producers, including tattoo artists, visual artists, activists, influencers, and drag performers from LGBTQ+ communities. This project draws on two sets of interviews: short asynchronous ones available online and longer in-person, semi-structured interviews. Participants reflect on their social media use, experiences as queer users, and perceptions of algorithms and AI in shaping discriminatory patterns. We also explored how they navigate, circumvent, or resist restrictive platform regulations.

Interview data is analyzed using grounded theory (Chamaz, 2017) through an iterative coding process. My inductive approach prioritizes participants' narratives, using mixed and experimental coding patterns (Saldaña, 2021) to remain attuned to their language and perspectives on algorithms. This analysis examines how their understanding of technology informs their actions and attitudes toward social media, particularly algorithms' treatment of queer identities. It also considers how these imaginaries are shaped by participants' positionality, including geography, culture, politics, and language.

Findings

Findings for this presentation are organized around two themes: being seen and looking back. LGBTQ+ people are made keenly aware of the surveillance upon them when they encounter algorithmic decisions or when they start to worry about being shadowbanned. Take Austra, a Berlin-based sex-worker advocate and activist, who lost access to his personal Instagram page after the sex workers collective' account he was managing got suspended. Although the collective's page went back up, he never retrieved his own account and, as a consequence, lost the archive of his transition as a trans man, a grieving process that transformed his posting behavior on the platform.

LGBTQ+ users feel particularly targeted for their identities, as they notice that cis, heterosexual users are not confronted with the same kind of pressure from social media platforms. In this context, they have no choice but to acknowledge this gaze upon them. Surveillance does not operate undercover: for these users, being surveilled is an integral part of how they navigate social media. As such, it is not a question of whether they will experience it, but when. This was exemplified by drag artist Jaqqstrap, in Montréal, when saying “you never forget the first time your post gets taken down by Instagram”. Surveillance becomes an inevitable aspect of platform use.

Being forced to acknowledge this surveillance also means that LGBTQ+ people are looking back. Indeed, I found that users are actively resisting surveillance by managing their visibility level towards algorithms or by pushing back against platforms’ expectations through the promotion of queer content. Resisting surveillance is risky, as users expose themselves to content moderation decisions with material consequences. For instance, Fred, a tattoo artist in Montréal, told me that while posting tattoos done on a trans person, they will make sure that mastectomy scars are never hidden from the picture. These actions are necessary to preserve the visibility and integrity of queer users’ content on social media. Although resistance happens to maintain their presence on existing platforms, I have also found that LGBTQ+ users are actively imagining alternatives to move out of the current social media landscape.

Discussion

With this presentation, I hope to discuss how acknowledging surveillance and resisting it is a mandatory condition for LGBTQ+ users on social media platforms. This complicates the call for imagining resistance strategies within surveillance literature, since it is already happening. It also complicates the idea that end users are passively being affected by datafication: for the users I have encountered in my research, they are acutely aware of these processes. Vernacular knowledge of surveillance mechanisms exists and is being circulated.

Moreover, thinking about ways to address surveillance in the contemporary technological landscape needs to take seriously how resistance has differentiated impacts across users, particularly when it becomes mandatory. Multiple users I have talked to mention being fed up, exhausted and frustrated that they must do this work. Sasha Kills encapsulated this idea eloquently when stating “in reality, we don’t have a choice [to resist and to be ready to find new platforms to occupy] and it is unfair. Actually, sometimes, when we have this kind of debate with people, they say, ‘yeah but you suffered so much, and this is what makes your strength’ and each time I answer back saying I shouldn’t have to suffer. I do not want to be strong.” This quote strongly illustrates that resisting surveillance is difficult to sustain and is not evenly distributed. Marginalized users, which are more heavily impacted by surveillance, are also the ones that have no choice but to acknowledge and address it, which becomes an additional emotional burden.

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