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PLATFORM GOVERNANCE AT THE MARGINS: RULES, RELATIONS AND RESISTANCE

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Social media platforms have great potential to educate young people and adults alike about sexuality, to create nurturing spaces of connection for marginalised communities across the globe, and to express oneself safely. However, this potential is always constrained by platform governance, or the processes of content moderation enacted by platforms and (state) regulation of platform companies (Gorwa, 2019), who are moved by economic and political interests to curtail or promote specific forms of expression (Stardust, 2024). This has greatly affected content surrounding sex work, sexuality, LGBTQIA+ and sexual expression, content by BIPOC users and activists (Haimson et al., 2021). Through the entanglement of rules, relations and resistance, we explore how users marginalised by platform governance communicate, express themselves, learn and work.

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Carolina Are focuses on rules through an analysis of policies governing sexuality education and gender expression on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Douyin and VK.com. She finds that despite efforts to improve governance, the seven platforms examined create a damaging digital narrative through their policies, portraying anything surrounding sexuality, sexual health, pleasure, and even consent as harmful. This way, the opportunities platforms provide to break down barriers and reach people in family, economic or geographic situations who may not be able to access sexuality education information (Monea, 2022) do not manifest.

Samuel Cabbuag and Crystal Abidin explore relations in the context of queer TikTok in the Philippines, through the use of case studies from specific influencers and content analyses of their videos. The app, the third most used in the country (Kemp, 2024), allows queer content creators to broker local registers of queerness, which roughly defines identities and lived experiences on TikTok. The authors find evidence of TikTokers resisting and reclaiming the derogatory terms used to define queerness, and of deployments of parasociality to commune with their audiences.

Also rooted in the Filipino context, Ruepert J.D. Cao's paper centres on resistance, examining how digital media enable, disrupt, and constrain queer sex work in Manila, shaping various labor practices. It explores the impact of platform adoption on sex work and how digital media sustain, regulate, and make sex workers invisible, revealing the precarious nature of queer male sex work in Manila's digital landscape. The author's work shows that sex workers rely on a fragmented network of apps, requiring constant adaptation to avoid deplatforming, financial tracking, and algorithmic erasure.

Zari Taylor and Kiara Child interrogate the suppression and platform governance of Black users to explore how they exercise agency through platform affordances to resist such practices. Through the case study of #BlackGirlPilates, their paper examines the utility of racialized hashtags in circumventing mainstream (i.e. white) perspectives, cultivating a community for us, by us in which the experience of Black women are centralized. The #BlackGirlPilates community takes on cultural significance as an agentic and resistive praxis. The authors demonstrate the importance of attending to cultural resistance, in-group identity-based social support, and reparative digital self-narration.

Christopher Persaud examines the digital sense-making and resistant practices of Los Angeles-based queer sexual content creators as they navigate sexual content moderation and platform governance issues. This paper explores how post, account, and community level moderation are intertwined as they co-produce a structurally hostile sanitized social media environment that further marginalizes explicit queer sexual cultural production. The author contends that queer sexual content creators engage in digital promotional work in response to the relationally stigmatized social conditions that are constitutive of sexual content moderation processes.

In blending rules, relations and resistance, our panel highlights the labour performed by users fighting to harness platforms' opportunities. In critiquing policies and enforcement through our case studies, we conclude with the importance of resistance and peer support.

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SEXUALITY EDUCATION IN THE SHADOWS OF PLATFORM POLICIES: AN ANALYSIS OF SEVEN PLATFORMS' TERMS

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Introduction

This short paper presents a summary of findings from a UNESCO-commissioned analysis of social media policies governing sexuality education and gender expression on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Douyin and VK.com. It constitutes the beginning of a broader project observing social media's potential to educate young people and adolescents about sexuality, a potential that is not (yet) fully realised. Indeed, platforms are often heavily moderated towards – or under the guise – of child protection (Tiidenberg and van der Nagel, 2020), which shields tech companies acting towards brand safety (Griffin, 2023). However, to truly empower young people safely, we need to prepare them for – and expose them to – potential risks through extensive, age-appropriate and early education (UNESCO, 2021), including sexuality and gender expression.

Methodology

After securing institutional ethics approval, [project ref: 8215], I selected the platforms to analyse in September 2024 according to the highest usage figures, measured by global

data intelligence site Statista (Statista, 2024), cross-referencing these on each platform's website. The platforms were selected for the opportunities they provide for content developers, educators, academia, and civil society organizations to engage in policy development and oversight. As such, they had to have a public-facing main feed (thus excluding messaging apps WhatsApp, Messenger, Telegram and WeChat).

Out of the chosen platforms, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat and Douyin have a high adolescent usage (13 to 19-year-old users). VK.com, a Russian-speaking platform with 84.700.000 monthly users (Statista, 2024), was then included due to its substantial user base and potential to shape global trends and practices, despite its more localized user attachment.

I selected policies from each platform's community guidelines pages on the basis of keywords extracted from the UN International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education's outline of key issues in this sphere, including policies governing: nudity and sexual activity; sexual solicitation; news, misinformation and healthcare; violence and public health misinformation.

Subsequently, policies surrounding the enforcement of said guidelines through content and account removals, use of recommender systems towards visibility promotion or reduction, and redress mechanisms were included. The analysis covered policies governing *organic* content as opposed to advertisements or boosted posts, given this study's focus on free expression and educational content.

The policies were selected in reference to peer-reviewed research on sexuality education, platform governance and internet studies (e.g., Are, 2021; 2024b;c; Caplan, 2018; Gillespie, 2010; Diaz & Hecht-Felella, 2021; Haimson et al., 2021; Monea, 2022; Paasonen et al., 2019; Sillence and McKellar, 2023; Stardust et al., 2022; Tiidenberg & van der Nagel, 2020; etc.). These studies also informed this research's thematic analysis of the policies selected, which aimed to identify, analyse and report themes or patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Analysis

The thematic analysis produced three main themes: **one-size-fits-all governance**, **juxtapositions of sexuality education and harm** and **absences**. These themes illustrate how the seven platforms' policies were found to be reactive and largely focused on preventing harms instead of governing a developing, diverse digital society. Platforms' creation of policies regulating specific harms often seemed to reflect PR damage control more than the wish to govern digital spaces (Diaz & Hecht-Felella, 2021), consistently with their conflation of sexuality with harm and with platforms' brand safety efforts (Griffin, 2023; Paasonen et al., 2019).

While the platforms observed have stepped their governance up by creating policies they constantly update and improve, their efforts still fall short of providing a welcoming, informative, age-appropriate and stigma-free environment for sexuality education and gender expression content for adolescents. Their **one-size-fits-all approach to governing** content by and for young people and adolescents *and* adults, by users

across different countries and different needs does not recognise inequalities in knowledge and awareness of sexuality education information. Although TikTok mentions needing to avoid imposing one country's law on another, and Douyin and VK.com focus on their local context, all the platforms examined use their hosting of a diverse user base to justify a sanitised and broad platform governance.

Social media policies frequently **juxtapose harms** such as child sexual abuse material and sexual assault with consensual depictions of sexuality: in YouTube's policies, consensual pornography appears in the same paragraph as violent exhibitionism and other non-consensual behaviours; on Meta platforms, *glorification* and *promotion of rape* – which are prohibited – are mentioned in the same line as stories of survival – which are allowed. These juxtapositions result in a stigmatisation of sexuality (Blunt et al., 2021; Bronstein, 2021), which is never depicted as healthy, and in the creation of norms shaping perceptions of safety related to this content, with many users self-censoring to avoid detection (Stardust, 2024). This is particularly concerning in the case of 'algospeak,' edited versions of words surrounding sexuality and anatomy used by medical and expert professionals to avoid moderation (Are, 2024a; Delmonaco & Haimson, 2022) – an approach that re-stigmatises and trivialises sexuality (Gaybor, 2020).

This stigmatisation of sexuality results in several **absences** emerging from the commercial rather than the civil governance that platforms enact: an absence of positive and enabling policies, resulting in governance reacting to the most pressing online harm instead of to the need to govern spaces like a society; an absence of distinction, where bodily displays are immediately sexualised (e.g., on Meta platforms, nudity and sexual activity are under the same policy umbrella); and an absence of pleasure, with platforms such as TikTok and Douyin even preventing depictions of 'sexualised' kissing.

Platform policies that *allow* sexuality education and gender expression but only as *exceptions* (e.g., YouTube's "Educational, Documentary, Satirical or Artistic" or EDSA exception) to nudity, sexual activity, sexual solicitation and general online harms result in confusing enforcement, largely enacted by algorithms and by a human workforce that is too small to cope with the amount of content that is constantly uploaded onto social media. Vague policies leading to mistaken enforcement put the onus to recover erroneously moderated content and understand moderation solely on the user, citing boilerplate policy as the reason behind decisions without direct examples or explanations (Are, 2024b;c).

Conclusion

The seven platforms' policies create a damaging digital narrative portraying anything surrounding sexuality, sexual health, pleasure, and even consent as harmful. This way, the opportunities platforms provide to break down barriers and reach people in family, economic or geographic situations who may not be able to access sexuality education information (Monea, 2022; Sillence & McKellar, 2023) do not manifest. Instead, platform governance can aid the most conservative values promoted by anti-gender, anti-rights movements in being upheld (Ipas, 2023; IPPF, 2011), and can even facilitate state surveillance and censorship in countries where sexuality education and gender

expression are stigmatised (Benslimane et al., 2024; SMEX, 2024). This means platforms become increasingly sanitised from healthy, consensual sexuality (Are & Paasonen, 2021; Griffin, 2023; Stardust, 2024), while misinformation that *does not* depict elements mistaken for sexual content such as scientific terms and/or bodies, but still shares harmful, damaging views about sexuality and gender is instead left up (Ging, 2017; Irfan, 2024).

These policies would benefit from recognising that sexual content is not inherently harmful, dangerous or inappropriate, that it does not need redeeming through EDSA labels, and that it has cultural, social, and political value (Stardust et al., 2022). They should incorporate positive and proactive – instead of reactive – action towards platforming sexuality education and gender expression content.

This analysis will be integrated with the next steps of this project: a qualitative study of content producers' experiences of platform governance, and a quantitative study of users' and content producers' experiences of platform governance. This analysis and subsequent projects will result in policy and enforcement recommendations.

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BROKERING KABAKLAAN: QUEER TIKTOK CONTENT CREATORS IN THE PHILIPPINES

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Introduction and Context

This paper aims to examine how queer content creators in the Philippines broker queerness, which roughly defines identities and lived experiences, on TikTok, the third most used app in the country (Kemp, 2024). In Philippine popular culture, LGBTQ+ people are often limited to comic relief roles; specifically, gay people are often boxed into effeminate gay roles usually working in parlors, or more macho roles like in 'Brokeback Mountain' (Garcia, 2009; Payuyo, 2012; Pamittan et al., 2017). The term *bakla* and its Cebuano counterpart *bayot* are usually used to refer to homosexuals, particularly effeminate gays (Garcia 2009). In Philippine culture, old perceptions of homosexuality often dismissed uses of the term as mere humor, albeit often deployed derogatorily to call out men who are not "manly" enough, or men who feel "fear" (Garcia 2009; Jacobo et al., 2019). Because of the stigma around the term *bakla*, other terms for 'gay' emerged in Philippine gay cultures such as *bading* and *becky* – also

shorthanded as *beki* and *beks* (Garcia, 2013). After surveying colloquial variants for *bakla*, this paper takes interest in the terms *bakla* and *kabaklaan* – both of which refer to ‘gayness’ or ‘queerness’ in general (Garcia, 2008) – which are being reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community in online spaces to continue to debunk the old perceptions and stereotypical connotations of *bakla* (Brosas, 2023). A cursory search on TikTok reveals many videos where *bakla* is hotly contested, used as both a homophobic slur as well as a celebrated identity. As such, this paper takes its interest in the discourse of *bakla* specific to Philippine cultures on TikTok.

Historically, the first Pride March in Asia was held in the Philippines in 1994 and since then, various LGBTQ+ organizations continue to fight for queer rights (Pascual, 2018). In the Philippines, queer representation has become mainstream in recent years, including queer-themed evening TV dramas on free-to-air channels such as *My Husband’s Lover* and *The Rich Man’s Daughter* – television shows where the actors who play the lead roles identify as LGBTQ+ persons in real life, like Vice Ganda. More recently, drag shows have become mainstream due to the rising popularity and acceptance of the reality show *Drag Race Philippines* (Diaz, 2015; Ramirez, 2024). While these representations help enhance the visibility of LGBTQ+ people and their values in mainstream conversations, the community continues to experience discrimination from different fronts, such as from conservative religious groups (Cornelio & Dagle, 2019). These communities live without any legal protection due to the continuous delay of approval of the anti-discrimination bill, also known as the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Expression (SOGIE) bill, which was first filed in 2000 (Ildfonso, 2024).

However, LGBTQ+ visibility is more prominent on social media, particularly on TikTok where queer TikTok content creators are among the most popular creators in the Philippines (Adobo Magazine, 2024). Queer TikTokers are cast in mainstream media as a testament to their popularity (Eusebio, 2025), and also engaged in social media marketing (Bejer, 2024). This paper investigates how queer Filipino content creators use TikTok in sharing discourses of reclaiming queerness/*kabaklaan*, including strategic navigations of platform policies in lieu of their borderline contentious content.

Framework and Research Questions

We engage with communication scholars Soriano and Cabalquinto’s (2022) framing of “digital brokering”, which refers to the different strategies of sharing identities and has four dimensions: (1) use of affective and aspirational contents, (2) credibility building, (3) discursive styles, and (4) platform-specific strategies. In the context of this paper, we will explore how queer content creators in the Philippines use affective and aspirational content, build credibility, produce discursive styles, and cultivate platform-circumvention strategies to broker their intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) on TikTok. Our research questions are:

RQ 1: How do queer Filipino TikTok content creators broker and reclaim queerness/*kabaklaan*?

RQ 2: What are the strategies that queer Filipino TikTok content creators use to maneuver around platform policies?

The framework of our study is rooted in an ethnographic approach, and we also engage with *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* [Filipino Psychology], particularly the local concepts of *kapwa* [‘relational other’] and *pakikipagkapwa* [‘recognition of shared identity’] (Clemente et al., 2008). These concepts provide a “Southern framing” (Connell, 2007) for analyzing how queer TikTok content creators recognize other users and creators and relate to their shared – and not-shared – identities (i.e. LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+). We are also informed by our training in sociology and media studies, and tie in “social media affordances” (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) – the uses and actions enabled or constrained by social media – and “gender performance” (Butler, 1988) to understand how queer content creators perform queerness/*kabaklaan* on TikTok by using its affordances. Our research follows the trajectory of communication scholars Alcazaren and Labor (2023) who studied queer affordances on TikTok through self-presentation techniques, and the creativity it avails to creators for negotiation of the self. We contribute to this scholarship by highlighting digital brokering (Soriano & Cabalquinto 2022) lens as a guide for explaining how *kabaklaan* is negotiated and reclaimed on TikTok.

Methodology

We use the case study method, a strategy that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-world context (Yin, 2018), and content analysis of selected TikTok videos. First, we surveyed different news articles that list TikTokers in the Philippines and selected ten queer TikTok content creators with at least 100k followers and featured in mainstream media (Bautista, 2024; Gatchalian, 2024). Through purposive sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015), we selected 10 videos with at least 10k views uploaded in 2024 from each TikTok content creator to derive an original corpus of 100 TikTok posts for study; this was the volume that also saw our data coding reach saturation (Wutich et al., 2024). These videos were then coded deductively through Soriano and Cabalquinto’s (2022) four dimensions of digital brokering.

Sample case study

In our presentation, we will highlight the case study of Filipino queer TikTok content creator Queen Dura (@queendura07), a female-presenting queer person with over 3.2M followers on TikTok. Her content includes story-telling vlogs, testing out various TikTok filters, occasional dance and singing videos, and live videos chatting with different people, especially conventionally attractive guys. Her brand of humor focuses on self-deprecation, bodily humor, and occasional sexual innuendos. She is a queer TikTok content creator who has experienced restrictions and penalties due to TikTok’s platform policies. Specifically, her previous TikTok account with over 100k followers was permanently banned, and her current account was temporarily banned from TikTok live a few times because of her contentious humor and borderline content.

Relationality and Platform governance

Preliminary findings from our study of Queen Dura and the queer TikTokers in our corpus point to clear patterns of relationality and the uses of *kapwa* and *pakikipagkapwa* in brokering discourses of how they present queerness/*kabaklaan*, parasociality with audience, among others. This process of *pakikipagkapwa* enables queer TikTok content creators to resist the derogatory use of *bakla* and queerness/*kabaklaan* through the brokering discourses of their version of queerness/*kabaklaan*.

Our presentation will close with a reflection on the limitations of platform governance that does not accommodate cultural norms and ethos of users in the margins, like queer TikTokers, and underscore how queer TikTok content creators in the Philippines broker their *kabaklaan* in spite of and to circumvent stringent community guidelines.

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QUEER MALE SEX WORK IN MANILA: AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH

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This paper examines how digital media enable, disrupt, and constrain queer sex work in Manila, shaping a distinct digital ecology that introduces various labor practices. It explores the impact of platform adoption on sex work and how digital media fragments sex work into microtasks, rendering sex work invisible and the microtasks less valuable (see Casilli, 2025). While sex work has long been embedded in neoliberal ideologies of individualism and entrepreneurship (Tolentino, 2011; Foster, 2016), queer male sex workers in Manila navigate these through digital platforms that shape how sex work should be carried out.

Following Jones (2015), sex work is defined as labor involving the sale of sexual services, performances, and media. This extends beyond prostitution to include pornography, erotic massages, and camshows. However, dominant understandings of sex work are rooted in Western contexts, whereas the Global South, including Manila, operates within a distinct media landscape. Unlike integrated platforms like OnlyFans which consolidate segments of sex work such as marketing, communication and payment collection, Manila's queer sex workers rely on a patchwork of apps, requiring diverse artistic, social, and digital survival skills to maintain visibility in a media environment that often erases them. Using a virtual ethnographic approach (Hine, 2000, 2015), this study draws on online and offline ethnographic conversations, autoethnographic data, observations, and content analysis of digital platforms. To

protect sex workers, the names of platforms are anonymized, given the risks of criminal liability.

Queer Male Sex Work and Digital Media

The Philippines has a complex relationship with sex work due to the influence of Christianity and various legal restrictions. Under Articles 200-202 of the Revised Penal Code, prostitution is illegal if committed by women, while the production, exhibition, and distribution of pornography remain criminal offenses. Despite being a taboo topic, sex work permeates popular consciousness, with male bodies and sex work being well-represented in media (Cañete, 2014; Tan, 1995). However, queer identities and sex work continue to be debated, leading to social and economic marginalization of male sex workers (Tan, 1995). Queer visibility in Philippine culture has grown, including Pride March participation (Soriano & Cao, 2016; Idefonso, 2024) and the economic influence of affluent gay men (Tolentino, 2009), but queer individuals still lack legal and economic protections. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated economic precarity for marginalized youth (Sumner et al., 2020), making sex work a necessary but convoluted livelihood for many queer men.

Tolentino (2009) traces male sex work in the Philippines to the 1970s when the Marcos administration promoted female labor migration to manage national debt. This feminization of labor left male sex workers operating in guild-like bars under corrupt law enforcement, catering to wealthy gay clients. Many engaged in drug use and risky behaviors to negotiate their gender and sexual identity as men. While sex work remains stigmatized, some workers see it as a temporary, pragmatic choice beyond economic necessity (Rand, 2019; Jones, 2015; Sanchez, 2021).

Digitization has expanded sex work opportunities, allowing queer and straight men to engage in the trade more autonomously. Scholars argue that digital platforms enable sex workers to filter clients, advertise, schedule work, and maximize earnings outside agency control (Hamilton et al., 2022; Sanders et al., 2018; Ryan, 2019). Platforms like OnlyFans facilitate payment, marketing, communication, and service provision but take significant revenue cuts. These platforms also enforce legal requirements such as identification, banking access, and identity verification. Many sex workers use link aggregation tools like Linktree to manage their digital presence across multiple platforms, enhancing self-branding. However, strict platform regulations and account suspension policies pose risks. Content creators who violate platform guidelines face deplatforming, making it difficult to reestablish their presence.

Ultimately, while digital media offer new avenues for queer sex work in Manila, they also impose unique constraints. The reliance on multiple platforms creates new labor demands and vulnerabilities, shaping how sex workers negotiate visibility, legality, and economic survival.

Queer male sex work and patchworking

Sex workers operate within an informal economy, leveraging multiple platforms to facilitate various aspects of their work. This fragmented approach allows them to avoid the restrictions imposed by formal, integrated platforms. Figure 1 illustrates the flow of queer male sex work, from marketing and advertising to after-sales interactions.

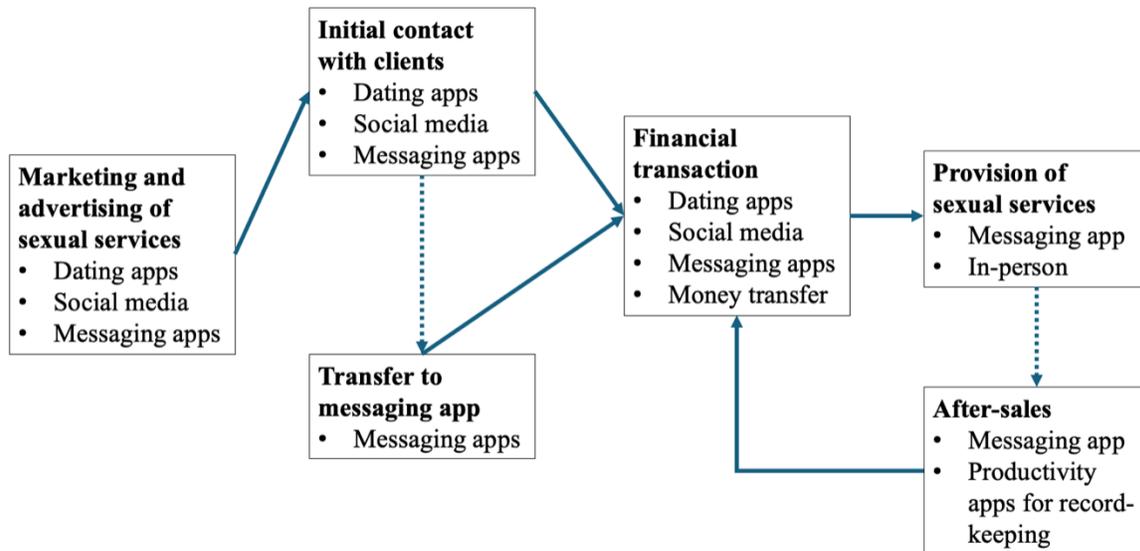


Figure 1. The pipeline of mediated sex work in the Philippines. The diagram shows the overall flow of work and the apps associated with each step of the pipeline. Dashed arrows mean that the next step is optional.

This paper introduces the concept of patchworking, an assemblage of apps that workers deliberately choose to build a media ecology that fulfills their purpose. Individual apps have separate rules and restrictions, leading to continuous operations in case a worker is deplatformed in one of the platforms.

Many platforms actively suppress sex work by classifying it as obscenity or financial fraud. For instance, some dating apps identify and remove sex workers using IP addresses, emails, or usernames that suggest involvement in sex work. Similarly, social media platforms employ opaque algorithms to suspend or shadow-ban sex workers, limiting their visibility (Cao, 2021). Due to these restrictions, sex workers engage in minimal self-branding, emphasizing body type, age, and sex role rather than engaging in marketing strategies. Unlike OnlyFans creators who use professional staging and storytelling, Filipino male sex workers keep their services ambiguous. This flexibility allows them to negotiate with clients and monetize spontaneous encounters. Since their profiles are frequently removed, tools like Linktree are ineffective for maintaining an online presence.

Financial transactions are conducted via money transfer apps or cash, ensuring anonymity and seamless spending in both formal and informal markets. Banks are avoided due to transfer fees and concerns over privacy. Some workers perceive money transfer platforms as lenient, enabling discreet transactions. Additionally, sex workers store and distribute their pornographic content using messaging apps or cloud services. These platforms allow them to organize and sell videos through private channels. However, managing subscriptions and financial records can be challenging, especially

when platforms remove explicit content. The long-term sustainability of “lifetime” subscriptions, often priced at \$20 or more, remains uncertain if cloud services delete stored materials. Messaging apps also play a crucial role in after-sales engagement. Sex workers use them to solicit feedback, encourage repeat business, and foster ongoing relationships with clients beyond transactional sex. Building rapport with customers increases the likelihood of sustained engagement, requiring workers to tailor their interactions accordingly.

In a patchwork, an app may correspond to a particular kind of tasks, and collectively, these apps can facilitate different kinds of microtasks needed to fulfill a particular kind of work. In sex work, dating apps may be used to market one’s services or communicate with clients, while messaging apps can be used to maintain contact with existing clients or distribute pornographic materials. Unlike integrated platforms that can fully ban sex workers, this fragmented system allows them to continue parts of their work while facing manageable limitations. While dating apps generally ban sale of sexual services in their platforms, users can simply make new accounts. While the worker can consistently adapt, patchworking also exponentially multiplies manual work or microtasks that they perform, leading to unsustainable work when faced with economies of scale.

Conclusion

This study reveals the precarious nature of queer male sex work in Manila’s digital landscape. While digital platforms provide autonomy and income opportunities, they also impose strict constraints. Unlike integrated platforms, sex workers rely on a fragmented network of apps, requiring constant adaptation to avoid deplatforming, financial tracking, and algorithmic erasure.

Digital media both enable and constrain sex work, reinforcing economic precarity and limiting long-term stability. Sex workers must navigate platform suspensions, ambiguous legal frameworks, and fluctuating digital economies while maintaining anonymity and securing income. Their labor extends beyond direct service provision to include branding, negotiation, and customer retention within an ecosystem that frequently erases them.

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FOR US, BY US: RACIALIZED HASHTAGS AS RESISTANCE

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Black TikTok users in the United States have staged several campaigns on the platform to call attention to the suppression or shadow banning of their content (McClusky 2020) and the lack of recognition or credit for popular trends on the app (Hatmaker 2021). “TikTok as an app is not friendly to Black creators,” 20 year old Chinyelu Mwaafrika told Time Magazine in 2020. “Whether that’s because of the way that it’s programmed, or because of the way that users interact and engage with content, it’s not an app that you see a lot of Black creators getting hugely successful on” (McCluskey 2020). At the time, TikTok attributed these incidents to a “technical glitch” (Shead 2020) and had attributed other acts of censorship of marginalized users as part of an anti-bullying effort (Hern 2019). This paper uses the context of suppression and platform governance of Black users to explore the ways in which users exercise agency through platform affordances to resist such practices. Specifically, we offer a case study of #BlackGirlPilates to explore the utility of racialized hashtags in circumventing mainstream (i.e. white) perspectives, cultivating a community for us, by us in which the experience of Black women are centralized.

Relevant Literature

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have contended with the relationship between race and technology, specifically the way in which the internet is shaped by and dependent on racial ideology. Safiya Noble (2018) uses “algorithmic oppression” to describe racism and sexism justified within sociotechnical systems like search engines because they are seen as objective or credible. Ruha Benjamin (2019) argues that technology can be used to amplify hierarchies and deepen discrimination behind the veneer of benevolence. Given their work, in addition to others, anti-Blackness is not a glitch in the system, but emblematic of its racial encoding. This framework informs how identity and discrimination are foundational to the structure and culture of the internet, as well as shaping the experience of users. In this study, we offer #blackgirlpilates as a agentic practice of resistance precisely because it operates within and against this context in which their experience and identity is marginal or discriminated against. We suggest that the use of racialized hashtags allow black women to carve out and name a space for themselves – taking back control of online content about them rather than relying on racist and sexist narratives that may exist on the internet. These align with further literature on Black feminism (Collins 2000), particularly in digital spaces (Steele 2021).

Additionally, we rely on literature on hashtags as online organizing functions (Buarki 2018; Gao et al. 2011) and for the expression of identity. Brock (2012) maintains that Black Twitter hides in plain sight and is “discoverable” to a mainstream audience through hashtags. The performance of Black identity is also tied to the hashtag’s ability to display cultural knowledge, typifying the linguistic practice of signifyin’, and a larger Black American oral tradition that is recognized and responded to by other Black users. Sanjay Sharma (2013) conceptualizes “Blacktags” as a particular type of hashtag and racialized digital object that is associated with Black Twitter due to this cultural

commonplace. Blacktags are constructed with a specificity and latch onto anti-racist discourse, producing networked subjects who perform identity in “unraced” spaces.

Methodology

In order to tease out the relationship between race, pilates, and the search capabilities of TikTok that have framed this paper thus far, we conducted a comparative analysis of #pilates and #blackgirlpilates. This analysis is situated within Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) conceptualized by Andre Brock (2016) as a multimodal analytic that incorporates empirical examinations of the material and cultural properties of technology with critical frameworks animated by queer theory, critical feminism, and postcolonial studies among others. We utilize CTDA as a methodological framework situating TikTok’s search engine as a technological artifact that reinforces the whiteness of technoculture and considering how Black women make their racial identity visible in response through the lens of critical race and Black feminist theory.

Our analysis included the first 30 results for #pilates and #blackgirlpilates on the desktop version of TikTok. 30 represents an appropriate corpus of videos to be engaged with during a user’s search and analyzed closely and critically. We collected metadata and engagement metrics (such as date posted, caption, hashtags, and likes) of all search results and inserted them into a spreadsheet. We also coded for the type of content (i.e. vlog, tutorial, GRWM etc.), and the perceived racial and gender identity of users in the videos. All data was manually collected and coded on February 26, 2023. The two primary levels of analysis were the perceived racial and gendered identity of users and the hashtags used across both searches.

Analysis

The majority of search results for #pilates in our corpus included white women, making them the default user visible in the search for pilates content and mirroring the overrepresentation of whiteness previously discussed. For any end-user looking for content about Pilates, the default user being white may not be questioned because of an assumption that the search engine is presenting objective information. Thus, white women’s experiences are front and center in the search for content about Pilates. Whiteness is presented as a universal “norm” though read through individual users. Oppositely, all users under the second search (#blackgirlpilates) were Black. These videos could be categorized under the same genres as those in the first search. Black women often contend with being the only student and instructor or other feelings of isolation within Pilates. The use of racial qualifiers in their content calls out to other Black women in ways that intentionally craft a place where they can find support from those who look like them and have similar experiences.

#Blackgirlpilates functions as a racialized hashtag that combines the ability to filter content with users’ desire to perform racial identity online. On TikTok, racialized hashtags engage with other affordances like the “For You Page” (FYP) algorithm, which constructs personalized content based on user engagement. This means that posting with #blackgirlpilates can bring similar content to users’ feeds without them necessarily searching for it. Given the whiteness of Pilates culture and content without the racial

qualifier, deploying racialized hashtags allows Black women to have a role in shaping the content on the platform as they wish and exercise agency to construct a narrative on their own engagement with Pilates. This specific case study can also be broadened to general life circumstances shared online through non-topical #BlackGirlTikTok or other combinations (Taylor and Abidin 2024).

Black women use #blackgirlpilates as a form of embodied objectification (Halliday 2022) to label content and circumvent the whiteness of #Pilates on TikTok and in the material world. Beyond the technical affordances, #blackgirlpilates has a cultural significance as an agentic and resistive praxis, because it constructs a virtual space for Black women. Though they may be alone in studios, they are not alone when searching #blackgirlpilates and seeing that there are many other Black women with something in common. Black women deploy hashtags for their unique purposes, showcasing how platform affordances structure forms of agency, despite simultaneously causing harm – i.e. the need for a qualifier in the first place.

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RESISTING THE SANITIZED PLATFORM: QUEER SEXUAL CONTENT CREATORS' DIGITAL SENSE-MAKING IN RESPONSE TO SEXUAL CONTENT MODERATION

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Introduction

Queer sexual content creators have varying algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2017) about how sexual content moderation works. My participants' attempts to better understand their opaque content moderation experiences encouraged them to develop algorithmic folk theories (DeVito et al, 2017) that shaped their digital promotional work and resistant visibility. Rather than privileging a platform company's official narration of how sexual content policies are abstractly applied, attending to how queer creators navigate their material encounters with sexual content moderation sheds light on how these systems function in practice. Constantly changing community standards regarding sexually themed content are likely the result of the platform's interest in accommodating both US Legislation FOSTA-SESTA's association of all online sexual content with sex trafficking and corporate directives to offer optimal digital real estate for advertising (Bronstein, 2021). Beyond temporary suspensions and permanent deletions, platforms mobilize a range of moderation options to restrict the visibility, agency, and interactive

capacities of creators that they deem to be posting borderline or gray-area content (Are, 2022; Gillespie, 2022; Cotter, 2023).

Attending to how queer sexual content creators make sense of and resist sexual content moderation highlights the importance of examining content moderation impacts on users' digital subjectivity and personhood. My participants' descriptions of their sexual content moderation difficulties point to an emerging coherence between platforms that works to produce "sanitized" heteronormative social media spaces in which queer people and sex workers, among other vulnerable groups, are further excluded (Griffin, 2022; Monea, 2022; Waldman, 2022b; Stardust, 2024). By positioning non-normative, alternative, and explicit sexual cultures as inherently deserving of discipline, surveillance, and management by platform companies, I argue that sexual content moderation produces a structuring stigmatization that attaches itself to those that are processed through its system.

Methodology

This paper presents findings from an ethnographic research project from 2019-2024 (based in Los Angeles, California, USA) that included interviews, digital and in-person participant observation, fieldwork, and artistic/creative research activities. I engaged in snowball and convenience sampling, where I intentionally built out my list of potential participants from encounters during fieldwork and word-of-mouth referrals from personal connections. Otherwise, I identified relevant creators through a combination of algorithmic recommendations for suggested accounts, manual sorting through the following lists and collaborations histories, and everyday social encounters in queer kink and nightlife spaces. This paper draws on interviews and participant observation with 28 queer sexual content creators, wherein qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis and context-dependent analysis to examine sexuality from a critical communicative perspective (Comella and Sender, 2013; Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Discussion of Key Themes

Post-level moderation was a major concern for my participants, who leveraged interpretive techniques to respond to both reactive and proactive content moderation. Creators engaged in a variety of sense-making activities as they contend with user flagging and automated moderation issues, piecing together clues from interactions with users and the platform in the absence of convincing content policy justification. Taken together, their creative auditing and rationalization practices suggest an enduring interest in developing agency within an asymmetrical power relationship to Instagram's platform governance system. Some chose to interpret routine encounters with the platform's reported posts workflow as a sign that they were successful in their attempts to garner attention, but they remained concerned with how little agency they had in the process. Not knowing exactly how something becomes the subject of reactive content moderation led participants to speculate about being the targets of either some specific user they had irritated or some unknown group that was opposed to their presence entirely. My participants' speculation is not unfounded, given evidence that queer creators and creators of color who engage with nudity and sex are common targets of

user flagging as a means of policing their participation in social media spaces (Are, 2024; Haimson et al, 2021, Myers West, 2018).

Participants identified **account-level moderation** mechanisms as negatively impacting their ability to generate income and manage their visibility on social media platforms, further eroding their economic security and excluding them from digital social life. Beyond outright suspending or deleting an account, platforms regularly intervene through reduction moderation to constrain the circulation of problematic content without actually removing it (Gillespie, 2022). Account-level moderation also contributes to creators' overall algorithmic precarity, through which unpredictable and volatile interactions with platform algorithms and features have become constitutive components of their day-to-day work (Duffy, 2020; Duffy, et al, 2021). In this way, their vulnerable position is exacerbated by their status as stigmatized non-normative producers within broader platform-dependent cultural production contexts.

I argue that repeated post and account-level moderation become markers of cumulative marginalization that shape **the moderation of communities**, which queer sexual content creators interpret as further excluding them from platforms' vision of an ideally monetizable commercial Internet. Research on content classification systems has demonstrated that social media platforms actively engage in discursively constructing "good" and "bad" LGBTQ people based on their content production (Southerton et al, 2021; Thiago et al, 2021). Widespread deployment of automated text filters, language sorting mechanisms, and NSFW image classification technologies has led to many controversies that frame the cultural activities of LGBTQ social media users as particularly deviant (Bridges, 2021; Duguay et al, 2020; Monea, 2022; Waldman, 2022b). Reduction moderation tactics were framed as having relational resonance between participants, suggesting that queer sexual content creators share an algorithmic imaginary about opaque reduction moderation being applied to their community. While seemingly distant from explicit anti-queer and sex-negative sentiments, algorithmic sexual content moderation and other systems of classification do not abstract away moral questions or value judgments; they further expand and obscure them.

Conclusion

The different dimensions of sexual content moderation that I have highlighted in this paper come together to reinforce ideas of appropriate social media cultural production that place queer sexual content creators in a stigmatized and structurally disadvantaged position. This has cascading effects within their community of creators, where discipline of one creator spills over to others. As Waldman (2022a, pg. 953) notes, regardless of whether sexual content moderation policies are intentionally discriminatory against queerness and queer creators, "platforms developed them within a conservative sociolegal context, designed them to achieve corporate goals, and allowed them to give discretion to nonexpert enforcers who often have normative sexual biases." From this perspective, it is clear that social media platforms are actively engaged in discursively constructing binary notions of sanitized acceptable queerness while relegating public sexual expression and queer sexuality as harmful, employing heteronormativity as the means through which these labels are fixed (Griffin, 2024; Waldman, 2022a).

Furthermore, allowing LGBTQ people access to the digital public on the condition that they strip themselves of actual representations of sex and sexuality produces a “digital closet” in which their participation is on heteronormative sex-negative terms (Monea, 2022; Tiidenberg and Van Der Nagel, 2020). Despite political pressures and sociotechnical efforts to constrain their visibility, queer sexual content creators resist the sanitized platform as their digital promotional work slips between the gaps of sexual content moderation systems. Yet, content moderation involves more than just individual content and accounts. The policing and adjudication of queer sexual content creators does not end with their punishment; its consequences and creator resistance to these governance efforts shape the reception of queer cultural production more broadly on social media platforms.

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