EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF Cultural Studies

Special Issue

European Journal of Cultural Studies
1–19
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DOI: 10.1177/13675494231212346
journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs

The politics of vulnerability in the influencer economy

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Abstract

While workers of all stripes are compelled to embrace uncertainty under conditions of neoliberalism, ideologies of risk assume a particular guise in the platform economy, wherein laborers are exhorted to 'put yourself out there'. Given the attendant harms associated with public visibility – especially for women and other marginalized groups – it seems crucial to explore platform-dependent laborers' experiences of 'putting themselves out there'. This article draws upon in-depth interviews with 23 social media influencers and content creators, sampled from across platforms, content niches and subjectivities. Our analysis revealed that vulnerability is a structuring concept in the influencer economy – one that operates at multiple, often overlapping levels. First, the commercial logic of authenticity casts *personal vulnerability* as a strategy for building community and accruing followers. But influencers' individual disclosures were often entangled with their social identities (e.g., gender, race, sexuality, ability and body type), which rendered them *socially vulnerable* to targeted antagonism from audiences. Interviewees experienced a range of harms, from identity-based hate and harassment to concerted take-down campaigns. These personal and social vulnerabilities were compounded by the vulnerabilities of platform-dependent labor: not only did participants identify the failures of platforms to protect them, some shared a sense that these companies exacerbated harms through a commercial logic that incentivizes antagonism. After examining the emotional labor necessary to manage such *platform vulnerabilities*, we close by reiterating the unique precarity of platform labor, wherein participants lack the social and legal protections typically afforded to 'vulnerable workers'.

Keywords

Creator economy, gender, harassment, influencers, labor, precarity, social media, visibility, vulnerability

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Introduction

> *You can write a song, put it out there the next day, and have millions of views. That's the craziness of it, the morality of TikTok. You can literally go viral in one second. That's always my biggest advice for young kids . . . don't be embarrassed to just put yourself out there, because you can do it now. Everyone can do it, and everyone gets the same platform.*
>
> Tate McRae, emphasis original.

In the interview excerpt above, YouTuber-turned-pop star Tate McRae responds to a *Rolling Stone* reporter's provocation about the potential of digital media platforms to 'democratize' artistic expression (Anderson, 2022). After conceding that social media can be 'a blessing and a curse', McRae touts the equalizing power of platforms: 'everyone' can access the creative tools furnished by platforms, and 'everyone' can secure an audience. Such sentiments seem to revive early-2000s era euphoria about the empowering potential of digital media (e.g., Benkler, 2006). It is not incidental that McRae's own ascension to fame closely followed the playbook of Internet-enabled success: she launched her YouTube channel in 2011, at just 11 years old; 2 years later, an appearance on the reality show *So You Think You Can Dance* helped grow her subscriber tally. Then, in 2019, her self-penned song 'One Day' went viral on YouTube and TikTok, vaulting her viewership into the tens of millions and seizing the attention of record labels. By 2023, McRae was signed with RCA, had a 20-city tour on the books, secured a coveted spot on *Forbes*' catalog of '30 under 30' and was named an ambassador for brands such as Maybelline and Sony. And so, after counseling other young aspirants to embrace their vulnerabilities ('don't be embarrassed'), McRae invokes the siren song of the platform era: 'just put yourself out there.'

To be sure, the exhortation to *put yourself out there* well predates the emergence of TikTok and YouTube; it is both a resonant narrative in post-feminist 'confessional cultures' (Allen, 2020; Banet-Weiser, 2015; Orgad and Gill, 2022) and a key axiom of a neoliberal job economy, defined by ideologies of risk and practices of self-governance (Hearn, 2010; Neff, 2012; Scharff, 2015). Yet this mantra circulates especially vibrantly within a platform economy predicated on the commercial logics of visibility and attention-driven data (Van Dijck and Poell, 2013). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that mainstream social media platforms – among them, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok –plug the potential social and economic rewards available to those who adhere to their so-called 'visibility mandates' (Duffy and Hund, 2019). In a bid to attract new creative talent, TikTok (2020) hypes its 'power to connect [you] to an audience you may not reach anywhere else – an audience that loves your authenticity'. Meta representatives, seeking to entice participants to join Facebook's Creator Studio, draw upon long-standing career ideals, including the ability to 'get discovered, [be] connected . . . and earn money' (Facebook 'About', 2022).

Despite the 'entrepreneurial you-can-do it-ness' (Littler, 2017: 121–122) that shrouds platform companies' appeals, it is important to acknowledge the deeply ambivalent ways that individuals experience (mediated) visibility. Chronicling the emergence of mass media over the course of the 20th century, Thompson (2005) explained how political

leaders thrust under a high-powered microscope learned how 'visibility . . . can become the source of a new and distinctive kind of *fragility*' (p. 42). More pointedly, he continued, mediated visibility has the potential to 'slip out of their grasp and can, on occasion, work against them' (p. 94). Writings on the politics of representation in traditional media environments have also helped to lay bare the fraught nature of visibility for historically marginalized populations. Analyses of the media's treatment of women, the LGBTQ community, and racial and ethnic minorities underscore how, even as images of these groups became more pervasive in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the characterizations 'reflect the biases and interests of those powerful people who define the public agenda' (Gross, 2001: 4, see also Collins, 2001; Sender, 2005; Tuchman, 2000 [1978]).

While stereotyping and tokenism are among the harms associated with representations that circulate in *traditional media* contexts, the vulnerabilities associated with *digital visibility* range from surveillance and policing to networked hate and harassment (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Browne, 2015; Marwick, 2021; Meisner, 2023). It is perhaps axiomatic to note that experiences of online antagonism map onto existing markers of power and inequality; women, people of color and other marginalized communities bear the brunt of identity-based hate miring the Internet (Lawson, 2018; Sobieraj, 2020). Taking seriously the experiences of historically disadvantaged groups in digital contexts has become even more urgent given how unequivocally the neoliberal job economy compels workers to 'put themselves out there'. Few categories of workers are exempt from the directive to engage in social media promotion on behalf of themselves or their employers. Alarmingly, studies of journalists (Holton et al., 2023; Lewis et al., 2020), scholars (Veletsianos et al., 2018) and scientists (Gosse et al., 2021), among other professional categories, reveal how the management of hate and harassment is often framed as *part of the job* (Masullo et al., 2018).

Especially relevant to the current study are accounts of creators' experiences with online antagonism. In 2021, for instance, lifestyle influencer Em Sheldon voiced to members of British Parliament the oft-overlooked pitfalls of her career, including being suspended in 'a dark space of the Internet where people spend all day writing about us' ('Social Media Influencers face relentless abuse MPs are told', BBC, 2021). More recently, a *Washington Post* report revealed how women YouTubers face an onslaught of harassment but receive very few resources or forms of institutional support. As a former YouTuber put it,

> It's a target on your back the moment you become successful on YouTube as a woman. YouTube wants you to post all the time, they want you to find success but they're not going to protect you once you have it. (Lorenz, 2022)

These anecdotes, which stand in marked contrast to McRae's upbeat perspective on platforms' visibility provisions, call for greater clarity about how social media personalities experience the demand to 'put themselves out there'.

Against this backdrop, this article draws upon in-depth interviews with 23 social media influencers and content creators. Given existing findings about the pervasiveness of misogyny and inequality in the social media economy (e.g. Banet-Weiser, 2018; Bishop, 2019; Duffy, 2017; Glatt, 2022), women and other marginalized communities

were overrepresented in our sample. Participants not only created content for a range of platforms (i.e. Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Twitch), they also represented diverse content genres and earned income from a variety of laboring activities (e.g. sponsorships, paid subscriptions, participation in platform reward programs).

Our analysis of interview data revealed that vulnerability is a structuring concept in the influencer economy – one that operates at multiple, oft-overlapping levels. First, the commercial logic of authenticity helped to cast *personal vulnerability* – that is, putting one's personal insecurities, injustices and even trauma on public display – as a strategy for growing community and improving career prospects. Crucially, influencers' individual disclosures were often enmeshed with perceptions about their social identities, including gender, race, sexuality, ability and body type. Indeed, participants' experiences of hate, harassment, and being 'called out' often were bound up with these *social vulnerabilities*. These personal and social vulnerabilities were compounded by the challenges of being dependent on a particular platform(s) for career-related visibility. Not only did participants report feeling underprotected in the face of hate, harassment and backlash, some explained how the logic of the platform environment incentivizes networked antagonism. Attempting to mitigate such *platform vulnerabilities*, participants described both anticipatory (e.g. self-censorship, platform filters, 'virtue signaling') and reactive (e.g. reporting, blocking) tactics. After examining the emotional labor necessary to manage such *vulnerabilities*, we close by reiterating the unique precarity of platform labor, wherein participants lack the social and legal protections typically afforded to 'vulnerable workers'.

Creative labor in the platform economy

In the two-plus decades since first-generation social networking sites such as Friendster, Myspace and Facebook emerged on the scene, digital media platforms have undergone a marked transformation from their standing as spaces primarily for social connectivity among peers. Mainstream social platforms increasingly function as key intermediaries within the so-called 'Creator Economy', a labor market which boasts more than 50 million participants worldwide and includes social media content creators, bloggers, influencers and livestreamers, among others (Yuan and Constine, 2020; see also Baym, 2018; Cunningham and Craig, 2019, 2021; Glatt and Banet-Weiser, 2021). Despite differences in the features, audiences and monetization systems of individual platforms, creators and influencers share an orientation toward commercial platform logics, including the latter's "economic and infrastructural extensions" (Nieborg and Poell, 2018).

It is despite – and perhaps *because of* – this level of *dependence* that popular accounts of the creator economy foreground the *independent* nature of social media labor. Neither creators nor influencers are considered legal employees of platform companies; they are, instead, part of a sprawling class of independent contractors. Presumably, such appeals to 'entrepreneurship' help to gloss over the less auspicious elements of self-employment. What could be more seductive than the prospect of being one's own boss and monetizing one's passion project – all the while evading the monotony of a typical 9-to-5? In some cases, the entrepreneurial qualities ascribed to influencers and content creators have become hitched to enlivened gender politics, particularly through unabashedly feminized

genres like momprenuers, mumfluencers and boss babes (Abidin and Gwynne, 2017; Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017; Entwistle and Wissinger, 2023; Petersson McIntyre, 2021). As Hund (2023) usefully reminds, the ascent of the influencer industry can be understood as a partial response to 'the persistent structural discrimination in many workplaces' (p. 31). But if these new career templates provide a space for women to 'retreat' from the patriarchal workplace, they do so by reinscribing participants in traditional social and domestic roles. As Petersson McIntyre (2021) put it, within these feminized social media genres, 'personal life experiences are conceived as assets that can be commodified'.

Here, it seems important to acknowledge the historical precursors to these purportedly novel career exemplars. Social media-borne careers share many features of earlier creative industry jobs, including the promises of autonomy, artistic freedom and self-actualization (Gill, 2010; Glatt and Banet-Weiser, 2021; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; McRobbie, 2002, 2016; Neff et al., 2005). There are less idyllic parallels between traditional and new media professions too, most especially the individualization of risk. Thus, Gill's (2014) description of media workers from a decade ago – namely that these 'new labouring subjectivities . . . take for granted that all of life's time should be available for work, or that the "risks" of cultural work should be borne entirely by the individual' (p. 516) – seems an apt way to characterize platform-dependent cultural workers (Poell et al., 2021). A key distinction, however, is that in the social media version, these so-called 'risks' have taken on a much more public – or perhaps, visible – quality with the collapsed distinctions between the personal and professional domains.

From visibility to vulnerability

In the platform economy, *broadly writ* – and in the context of influencer culture more specifically – few ideals are as resonant as visibility: it galvanizes participants to tally follows, likes and shares (Duffy, 2017; Hund, 2023; O'Meara, 2019); it animates their cross-platform labor practices (Abidin, 2016; Arriagada and Bishop, 2021; Baym, 2018; Glatt, 2022); and it compels them to rely upon algorithmic folk theories and 'gossip' (Bishop, 2019, 2020; Bucher, 2013; Cotter, 2019). But much as in traditional media contexts, social media's version of the visibility ideal is deeply fraught. It is, as Duffy and Hund (2019) argued in a study of professional and aspiring influencers, often tantamount to vulnerability, with influencers subjected to intensified scrutinization and the potential for criticism. To this end, Homant and Sender (2019) noted in their analysis of queer beauty vloggers that 'even as they capitalize their nonnormative identities and queer cultural resources, they have to work to absorb or deflect hostility and harassment from online "haters"'. The authors concluded, 'transgender and queer people and people of color must do significant emotional labor to deal with the consequences of being visible in online spaces' (p. 5394).

But vulnerability is not a 'super concept' (Han, 2018), and the concept has assumed other guises in the context of a neoliberal economy where it is imbricated with self-help discourses and the charge to be 'resilient' (Banet-Weiser, 2021; Ciccone, 2020; Gill and Orgad, 2015). What's more, while social media personalities have long shared intimate details of their personal lives with audiences in a bid to be 'vulnerable' (Marwick, 2013;

Raun, 2018), such sharing practices have taken on a heightened sense of importance in the wake of the global pandemic. In a blog post describing the 'New Age of Influencer Vulnerability', marketing expert Quigley-Jones (2020) put it:

> In the post pandemic age in particular, there's been a new sense that authenticity would step into a form of vulnerability. Viewers also started to reject the more aspirational/boastful lifestyle influencer content that previously dominated our Instagram feeds, preferring inspection, vulnerability and reality during a global pandemic. (para. 1)

In this context, some cultural critics have begun to detail how the performativity associated with social media had been eclipsed by efforts to accrue attention by sharing less idealized, more afflictive, even traumatic moments. Personal confessions, the sharing of traumas and projections of unflattering images are constitutive of what some term 'vulnerability porn' (O'Neill, 2020). Given the valorization of 'vulnerability' in the influencer and creator economies, it seems important to consider how participants make sense of – and navigate – the ostensible vulnerabilities of a highly visible career.

Methods

Our analysis draws upon in-depth interviews with social media influencers and creators from across the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada. Prior to recruiting participants, we obtained approval from our university's institutional review board for human participant research (Protocol # IRB0010300). To better understand how platform laborers' experiences with (perceived) visibility mandates vary across subjectivities and content categories, we purposefully recruited participants across a wide range of social identities (i.e. gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity), career levels and niches/verticals (fashion, beauty, education, gaming, fitness/wellness, parenting and sports). Although nearly all participants maintained a brand presence across more than one platform, they identified their primary accounts as Instagram, TikTok, Twitch, Twitter and/or YouTube.

We began recruitment by contacting individuals who had discussed some aspect of social media visibility in a public forum (through their social media account or a press outlet). We later posted a call for participants on Twitter, which received 69 responses. Of the 100 creator-influencers we invited to take part in interviews, 23 agreed to participate in a one-on-one interview. Although we did not ask participants for demographic information, many addressed aspects of their social identities during the interviews. The analysis that follows thus relies upon self-identified social categorizations and pronouns listed in their profiles. Here, it seems important to note that women and laborers located in the United States were overrepresented in our sample.

Interviews, which took place over Zoom or the phone, followed a semi-structured protocol and ranged from 20 minutes to more than an hour and a half. With participants' permission, these interviews were audio recorded on the researchers' personal devices. At the completion of the interview, participants received a small stipend in exchange for their time and insight, and interviews were sent to a professional service for transcription. The study's authors independently read all the transcripts and met regularly to

discuss themes that emerged inductively (Glaser and Strauss, 2017 [1967]). Together, the collaborators developed the coding categories and applied focused codes to the dataset.

Given that many of our participants discussed personal experiences of hate and/or harassment, we took time at the conclusion of each interview to express our gratitude for participants' willingness to share their vulnerable experiences. They also had the opportunity to request that topics discussed during the interviews be excluded from published material. To protect participants from additional vulnerabilities (see, for example, Gelms, 2021), we assigned them pseudonyms. Finally, when participants' accounts invoked potentially identifiable (i.e. searchable, traceable) information, we engaged in practices of 'ethical fabrication' (Markham, 2012).

Personal vulnerabilities: sharing struggles, displaying the self

Our interviewees explained how in the influencer economy, metricized visibility is often a necessary precondition for success. Noting the followers-based incentive structure underlying monetization, Yolanda told us: 'You have to work on just getting the subscribers, then getting the views, then actually getting to a point where you can get paid'. Sam, meanwhile, discussed the significance of algorithmic 'boosts' in regulating whether content gets shown – or made *visible* – to audiences. In discussing strategies of *visibility accrual*, however, interview participants shared a sense that projecting personally vulnerable elements of their lives was likely to resonate with audiences. Drawing on Koivunen et al.'s (2018) discussion of vulnerability as political language, we consider personally vulnerable expressions as those that make public individual insecurities, injuries or even trauma. Nora, for instance, explained how her followers lauded her for sharing her mental health challenges, including an autism diagnosis. Avery, meanwhile, decided to launch a social media account to 'share my daily struggles as a student [in the medical field] and hopefully connect with other people going through similar challenges'. Other participants attributed metric growth spurts to their growing willingness to broadcast more intimate, even painful elements of their lives with audiences. Raja thus explained how she openly discussed her childhood experience of losing her mother. She credited the disclosure with helping her 'connect' with other young women, while – crucially – noting that it paralleled experiences of 'getting more traction, more attention'.

For some of our participants, especially young, cis-gendered women, the demand for personal vulnerability was bound up with expectations for (normative) self-presentations. Eliza, for instance, recounted how images of the physical self were more likely to elicit 'likes', 'clicks' and 'comments'. She thus recalled how the first generation of bloggers (spanning roughly 2005 to 2013) did not necessarily foreground their own likenesses in their blog content. The rise of Instagram, Eliza noted, changed the conventions such that audiences started 'demanding' access to blogger-*cum*-influencers' personal lives.

In her words, "You have to show yourself 24 hours a day on social media...that's what generates the most revenue, and the most engagement." Unfortunately, Eliza added, some followers attribute these posts to narcissism rather than accountability to (other) audience members: 'People [respond] like . . . "She's doing another makeup tutorial

showing her face. She must be obsessed with how she looks"'. Nora, meanwhile, explained how some reflections on her autism diagnosis sparked accusations that she was lying to elicit attention; in other cases, critics replied to her comment with slurs for mental illness. As these examples make clear, sharing one's personal vulnerabilities was often slippery slope: it played to the tune of social media visibility logics, but such engagement could also include negative or harmful expressions. In the next section, we explore how often expressions of hate and harassment targeted influencers' (perceived) social identities. For now, it seems useful to foreground another vector of personal vulnerability, namely a shared sense of apprehension about 'speaking out'.

Indeed, influencers were often reluctant to voice experiences with online hate outside of their own digital subcultures. To do so was to deny a key axiom of these careers, namely a projection of gratitude toward followers and fans. As Audrey explained of the culture of Twitch harassment,

> I have friends that are like, 'Oh, yeah, you're harassed, but you're getting income doing this, so how can you complain?' There's this kind of level of, again, dismissing what your experience is because they just can't understand. Like, I know people that don't have any social media, but they do watch Twitch, and they just think, 'Oh, that's just part of it', you know? . . . They don't take it seriously because I feel like they've never even been anywhere close to that kind of position . . .

As she concluded, people who 'never actually put themselves out there [on social media] . . . don't understand at all'. Lucy, similarly, noted how members of the public seem to feel that harassment was something of an expected job risk for those who had succeeded in monetizing their digital personae. As she put it, 'People . . . look at content creators as almost like the devil. They don't see us as having a "normal job"'. Both Audrey and Lucy thus identified a career-related norm that seems to render critiques and complaints 'unspeakable' (Gill, 2014) – or worse, likely to further stoke the flames of hate.

In discussing experiences with negative feedback, Sam told us about a perception that creators are beholden to audience feedback given the transactional nature of creator culture (Baym, 2018). Reflecting on this so-called 'direct economic relationship', Sam explained:

> I think influencers are perceived as being much more independent, so I think people also not just feel entitled to their time parasocially, especially since there's a more direct payment relationship . . . Like, the economic consequences are more direct in the sense that if you have these hate campaigns, people are gonna unsubscribe from your channel, from your Patreon and so on, whereas with a lot of traditional celebrities, the establishment kind of protects you.

Engaging in a form of professional boundary work, Sam explained the heightened stakes for a tier of creators she described as 'somewhat famous'. As she reasoned, 'It could be that just with more exposure, more people see my posts. And so, more of these really unhinged, aggressive individuals, like, "Oh, here's something to fight about"'. But I also think there's an element of, 'Oh, I wanna see this "powerful" person taken down'. Such institutionalized schadenfreude has long been a catalyst for celebrity gossip (e.g. Cross and Littler, 2010, describe the 'delight of the celebrity free fall'); however, the updated, platform-dependent version lacks the protection of what Sam usefully describes as 'the

establishment'. Moreover, because of their non-celebrity status, there was a sense that influencers are – in Sam's words – 'potentially more deserving of harassment'.

Social vulnerabilities: identity-based hate and harassment

As the preceding accounts suggest, projections of vulnerability were compounded by wider cultural norms and hierarchies of social identity (i.e. gender, sexuality, race, ability and body type), which operate along overlapping systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). As Eliza's earlier-mentioned reflection on 'showing [her] face' suggests, experiences of vulnerability were guided by traditional codes of identity-based self-presentation. In other instances, expressions of online antagonism – which ranged from mockery and concerted efforts to 'cancel' the offending party to bullying and death threats – targeted influencers' perceived social identities. Beatrice, who often posted sports-related content, shared,

> Anytime we [women] post anything on social [media], it'll just be comments like, 'Women don't belong in sports', or just comments on their appearance or what they look like. And that has nothing to do with their job or what they're talking about professionally.

Audrey's participation in a different masculine-coded space – gaming – meant that she was especially susceptible to gender-based harassment. While she acknowledged the gaming industry is 'kind of changing', she explained how 'being a female in that space . . . you are very, very much harassed. Like, "Oh, go back in the kitchen. Make a sandwich. What are you doing on this platform? Girls can't play video games"'. Then, nodding toward the oft-invoked 'thick-skinned' rhetoric that recasts responsibility for managing harms on the victim, Audrey added, 'Women have to be so much stronger to be able to take the level of heat that they do on these platforms'.

An example from Esther – a language/translational YouTuber – indicated how gender-based harassment often involved physical surveillance and body policing. She explained that her body had changed in the 9 years since she launched her channel, and commenters routinely called out her weight gain, with remarks like, 'Wow, isn't that funny? Didn't she get fat?' She confessed, 'That's what bothers me more than anything'. Esther later speculated, 'I don't think I would get comments like that if I was a man, especially seeing as my YouTube content is not about my appearance in any way'.

Some of these expressions testify to the rampant culture of networked misogyny miring online spaces (e.g. Banet-Weiser, 2018; Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016; Gray et al., 2017; Massanari, 2017; Sobieraj, 2020). Nora explained how her overwhelmingly male audience (a trend which she attributed to platform algorithms) 'talk[s] about me in a way that is horrifying, and disgusting, and makes me feel very unsafe'. Another interview participant, Natalie, described the inevitable 'unsolicited dick pics' that come from a semi-public career. But Ashley complicated the common understanding of misogyny as enacted exclusively by men. She recalled that among the reasons she had 'moved away from being in the makeup space is [because] you have negative interactions'. Ashley, similarly, said: 'A lot of the fans of beauty influencers are very toxic. But they're not men'. In a recent article exploring the broader trend of influencer shaming and hateblogs,

Duffy et al. (2022) spotlight how women police the perceived authenticity of *other women* influencers, typically in the realms of careers, parenting and beauty; in so doing, the authors call attention to the structural underpinnings of lateral or horizontal violence. To this end, both Eliza and Sam reflected on the complicated dynamics of what Sam compellingly described as 'in-group harassment'.

Other creators described how the harassment they endured targeted their racial or ethnic identities. As Heather, a TikToker-turned-entrepreneur, shared, 'I'm Asian, and when I started on TikTok, it was a bit before the pandemic. And then, when the pandemic hit, it was like, "Well, your makeup has COVID," or they'd say really mean things'. Heather's experiences mirrored a wider culture of anti-Asian American sentiment that saw a marked uptick in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic (Cabral, 2021).

Thready, meanwhile, noted how their decision to make their sexual identity public (by including it in their Twitter bio) was a likely catalyst for antagonism. 'I definitely feel like the backlash that I was receiving . . . [was] potentially fueled by the fact that I was openly bisexual'. Thready continued, 'If someone of a marginalized identity than other people I know is on Twitter they tend to get the biggest, most negative reactions by comparison to people who aren't of marginalized identities'. Sam shared a similar sentiment, namely that, 'A lot of these influencers who kind of straddle the line of very progressive feminist queer [content] . . . and doing translational work to a broader audience . . . are especially subject to this version of harassment'. In other words, identity-based social vulnerabilities are compounded by the politicized nature of such content, creating something of a trap for those who expressly engage with political movements and issues (Glatt and Banet-Weiser, 2021).

Platform vulnerabilities: making it in the 'outrage machine'

While influencers chronicled various personal and social vulnerabilities associated with 'putting themselves out there', these were exacerbated by the challenges of working within a platform ecosystem that incentivizes attention – be it positive or negative. As Ahmad explained of the visibility logics driving mainstream social media platforms: even critical comments are a signal of 'really good engagement'. He explained that such metric indices of participation '[look] good to brands. People are voicing their opinions on your content and that's good either way'. Heather, meanwhile, suggested that an onslaught of criticism could be read as a sign that an influencer had 'made it'. Recounting the advice she offered to her teen son about his own YouTube channel, Heather shared: ''People are gonna write mean things to you. That means you made it. Do not let it get to you. Keep posting'. Not only does Heather's comment speak to the contemporary ethos of 'resilience', but, crucially, it relies on animosity as a professional benchmark.

During our interview, Heather supplied another anecdote that brought the fraught dynamics of platform visibility into sharp relief. She described how two women in her content creator network – one Black, one White – created similar videos for a sponsored page on conservational justice. As Heather recalled,

> the Black creator was getting a lot of hate on her videos. So, [the collective] turned off the comments for [the Black creator, who responded], 'No, don't turn off the comments, because if people don't interact with it, my video doesn't get pushed'.

She said, ‘I have to learn how to deal with the racist comments’. The notion of videos *being pushed* speaks to the structuring logic of algorithmic visibility, whereby videos with the highest level of engagement are favored by platforms’ algorithmic systems (Lewis and Christin, 2022). Some creators even suggested that visibility-based economies impelled platforms to serve content to expressly hostile audiences. As Ashley put it, ‘The algorithm . . . on any social media platform contributes to the outrage machine’. Thready, meanwhile, expressed a sense of frustration with the seeming futility of harassment mitigation available to platform users. As they said of the Twitter reporting process (in 2021, pre-Elon Musk takeover), ‘I don’t think Twitter’s gonna take any steps to fix [negativity] because – as far as they’re concerned – additional interaction is additional money.’ In other words, platform companies have little incentive to redress the type of interactions that sustain their business models.

Managing vulnerabilities: anticipatory and reactive tactics

Given the harms of incivility, hate and harassment that circulate in platform contexts, participants deployed various strategies to lessen the impact of these vulnerabilities – from hiring sensitivity readers (i.e. a freelancer attuned to cultural insensitivities and potentially offensive content) to platform-enabled filtering mechanisms. While some of these can be understood as anticipatory (i.e. as a bulwark against *future* negativity), others were reactive (in response to *past* negative expressions). In both cases, they required forms of emotional labor to manage the burden associated with ‘putting oneself out there’.

Anticipatory strategies: filters and self-censorship

To ward off vulnerabilities, some participants relied upon those protective features and affordances baked into individual platforms. Several participants, for instance, discussed their use of platform filtering mechanisms (i.e. Instagram’s ‘hide inappropriate content’ feature) to sift out abusive, profane or harmful language *before* it was publicly posted. To combat negative comments about her body size, Kelly told us how she ‘filtered the words for fat’ in multiple languages, to ensure the term did not appear in her comment section. Explaining his use of Instagram’s filter, Ahmed said, ‘I’m African American, so people love to use the N word a lot to either get my attention or just as a derogatory term. I do have a certain set of words on there that I do just eliminate’. Lucy, a plus-size Instagram influencer, was somewhat unique in offering praise for the platform’s filtering feature as ‘life changing’. As she put it, ‘You can block all the words that are triggering or uncomfortable or nasty . . . [Instagram’s] comment filter is the only thing I’ve seen that has helped me deal with the trolls’. More often, creators deemed these mechanisms as marginally effective, at best. Challenging the level of protection implicit in filters, Raja said, ‘You might want to block the main words like “bitch”, “fat”, “skinny”, but there are certain words that when used in context are really, really, really damaging’. She gave the example of the seemingly neutral phrase ‘you think’: ‘No one says “you think,” in a positive way. It’s always, “you think you’re so hot, you think you’re so smart”’. In other words, systems designed to mitigate harassment are scarcely fail-proof.

A more common mechanism of staving off potential critique was self-censorship (Duffy and Hund, 2019; Marwick, 2021), wherein creators sought to calculate potentially adverse reactions to their content. Kelly, who told us that her audience members represent diverse geographic backgrounds, always considered possible reactions to her content before posting: 'I think I'm very careful with what I say because I've seen that if you say something that could even slightly be misconstrued, someone will misconstrue it'. Across genres and platforms, creators lamented the dangers of online activism and political activity – admitting to not engaging with contentious issues because they feared online criticism. McKenna spoke directly to this sentiment: 'I avoided some types of content so that generally you avoid . . . criticism . . .'.

Creators also spoke to the inverse, wherein they actively posted content to align with progressive social movements in hopes that they wouldn't be 'called out' for apathy. Ashley admitted to posting political content to avoid negative reactions from her followers, who were upset about her past silence on issues – such as the Israel-Palestine conflict. She explained,

> If there's some sort of sociopolitical event happening, and you don't feel comfortable with the amount of knowledge that you have to speak on it, or if you just don't feel like it's your place to speak on it, you can find yourself in a position where you're essentially bullied into speaking on a position.

To this end, several of our participants discussed the looming threat of being 'canceled' amid a fiercely contested politics of accountability (Clark, 2020; see also, Lee and Abidin, 2021; Lewis and Christin, 2022). Anna, who conceded that influencer activism is 'great', expressed sentiment about the charge to comment on social issues to stave off critical blowback. As she put it, 'Obviously, you hear the term "cancel culture," and some people feel as if they're pressured to speak out on something, even if they don't actually really have that much of an opinion on it'. As these accounts make clear, virtue signaling – a term often associated with brands that superficially affiliate themselves with progressive causes or 'wokeness' – was deeply fraught. Or, as Sam put it, 'I recognize being canceled is very often, and perhaps most often, pretty legitimate but, I don't know, given the assumption that many, quote, unquote, "cancelings" and harassment campaigns within an in-group are – it's like a community overstatement of harm'.

Raja, meanwhile, explained her reliance on a group of 'tech smart girls' who help to moderate audience comments and remove bad-faith actors from her mourning support page. As she explained,

> We're trying to save space for a sisterhood so we're trying to keep it in the right demographic really . . . keeping it girls-only. Like I said, to keep a safe space. A lot of girls post pictures, if they got a spot or something like that. A girls-only space, really, sisterhood.

Despite the value of moderators to help protect creators from harm, it is important to acknowledge the overwhelmingly unpaid labor required to manage online communication in platform environments; such labor, far too often, falls onto marginalized community members (Nakamura, 2015).

Reactive strategies and platform failures

In addition to using anticipatory measures to mitigate risk, creators also deployed various practices to minimize harms post hoc. Some responses were passive, including a commitment to 'not reading the [negative] comments'. Others, meanwhile, relied upon platform-provided responses, including blocking, flagging and/or reporting systems (Crawford and Gillespie, 2016; Meisner, 2023). Anya told us that she does 'block people regularly...at least one or two a day.' Audrey, meanwhile, relied upon report mechanisms, although antagonistic audiences found workarounds. She did note that 'you can have moderators that lock the account'; however, her harasser 'would just come back and make a new account a few minutes later'. Such experiences eventually led her to stop streaming on Twitch.

Most interview participants, including Anya, critiqued platform companies for what they perceived as a failure to aptly protect users and creators. As she put it, 'They are not investing in [anti-hate speech tools] because they don't give a damn."

Heather talked about the lack of guidance from platforms on ways to protect creators, which has forced her to make personal decisions about what might incite backlash (see preceding section on self-censorship). She went on to critique platforms for failing to prevent negative expressions:

> Like there's nothing built into any of these platforms to provide any guidance on this. It would not be hard for Instagram to do a little flag thing. That's like, 'Oh, that looks like a kid, are you sure you wanna post it?' There's no warning bells or anything, or there's no form of guidance from the platforms themselves. This is all just me making these rules for myself.

To this end, interviewees reflected on their hopes for future improvements that would provide a safer space within which to create content and build community. Ahmad suggested that platforms could better support creators through the provision of specific protection mechanisms:

> I definitely think that we should not be funneled through the same support channels as, I hate to say, the general public, because that makes it sound so like celebrity-ish, but I don't know how to word it. But I definitely . . . these social media channels need to do a better job at reaching out to us, when there is an issue or there's something circulating online that we know is false.

Thready, meanwhile, shared their inability to lessen the severity of the backlash they received for a comment they considered to be taken out of context: 'It got out of control, and there was really no way – it felt like everything I was doing was throwing oil on the fire'. What these accounts share is a widespread frustration about the lack of protections and recourse available to them via their platforms of choice.

Conclusion: the new politics of vulnerability

Despite the widespread disparagement of influencers as modern-day career exemplars, the creator economy continues to grow at an astonishing clip. Reckoning with influencers'

work experiences and labor conditions is thus an issue of both economic and socio-political significance. In this article, we consider some of the oft-glossed over risks of platform-dependent creative careers, including vulnerabilities at the personal, social and platform levels.

Given the valorization of 'relatability' and 'authenticity' in social media culture, it is perhaps not surprising that personal vulnerability – or the compulsion to share intimate, even uncomfortable moments – was perceived as a strategy for community-building and accruing followers (Raun, 2018). But projections of vulnerability often elicited various responses, including a wide range of harms and incivilities – from trolling to bullying to death threats. These expressions were largely wrought by influencers' social identities – or perhaps, more aptly – audiences, perceptions of them. And so, much as in wider Internet culture, women, people of color, the LGBTQ+ community, among other marginalized groups, experienced heightened risks within online spaces. These personal and social vulnerabilities were compounded by the guiding logic of visibility (Van Dijck and Poell, 2013), wherein metric attention was cast as a key arbiter of success.

Some influencers shared experiences where platforms seemed to incentivize negative or harmful comments – a testament to what one interviewee dubbed 'the outrage machine'. Such an alarming trend speaks to findings from other contexts revealing that platforms like Facebook and Twitter exploit the relationships between hate speech and higher engagement for commercial gain (Lauer, 2021). Unfortunately, when *individuals* confront the most insidious risks of visibility in their personal and/or professional lives, it is often minimized by what Sobieraj (2020) describes as 'the assumption that this kind of harassment is the inevitable byproduct of life online, quickly remedied by "getting off the Internet" (p. 5). Of course, 'getting off the Internet' is hardly a viable option for participants in the put-yourself-out-there neoliberal job economy, and it is a sheer impossibility for influencers, content creators and other cultural workers whose careers depend on platformed visibility.

To this end, social media's visibility barometer seems to have much in common with the casting of traditional celebrities in the mediated public sphere (i.e. 'There's no such thing as bad publicity'). What's more, several of our interviewees invoked the notion of 'parasocial relationships' – a term often associated with celebrity personae. However, there are marked distinctions between traditional celebrity careers and the independent, often unregulated nature of the creator profession. The latter tend to lack the resources and mechanisms of support supplied by the celebrity industry complex: public relations teams, image managers, and legal and emotional structures of support (Duffy et al., 2022; Marwick, 2013). Lacking protection, participants shouldered the burden of anticipating or responding to compounded personal, professional and platform vulnerabilities. In a bid to stave off criticism, some influencers eschewed controversial content (i.e. self-censorship). Others strategically posted images and messages that would align with social movements and/or perceived social values – trends Wellman (2022) usefully describes as 'performative allyship' (see also Sobande et al., 2022).

Of course, creators also responded to hate and harassment post hoc, in part by relying on blocking, flagging and/or reporting mechanisms. Unfortunately, few of our interviewees found these platform measures wholly effective; what's more, they required

participants (or their networks) to supply additional forms of emotional labor. As Nakamura (2015) usefully reminds to this end, 'Social media platforms benefit from the crowd-sourced labour of Internet users who, with varying degrees of gentleness or force, intervene in racist and sexist discourse online' (p. 106; see also, Lawson, 2021).

These vulnerabilities of platform-dependent labor are exacerbated by the relationship of influencers and creators to the platforms on which they produce, distribute, market or monetize content (Nieborg and Poell, 2018). Given that platform companies denounce influencers' and creators' statuses as 'employees', these laborers are left without traditional structures of support – such as paid time off, retirement funds and human resource departments that can protect from workplace grievances (Vallas and Schor, 2020). Influencers are, in other words, prototypical 'vulnerable workers' (Bewley and Forth, 2010). And, so, returning to Tate McRae's urging for wannabe creators to 'put themselves out there', it is something of a truism that 'everyone gets the same platform'. We would caution, however, that the politics of visibility – and hence, the politics of vulnerability – staggeringly uneven in this open platform environment.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The authors would like to express their gratitude to the President's Council of Cornell Women and to the Cornell Center for Social Sciences, both of which provided funding for this research.

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