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The Nested Precarities of Platformized Creative Labor

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Abstract

While metrics have long played an important, albeit fraught, role in the media and cultural industries, quantified indices of visibility—likes, favorites, subscribers, and shares—are indelibly cast as routes to professional success and status in the digital creative economy. Against this backdrop, this study sought to examine how creative laborers’ pursuit of social media visibility impacts their processes and products. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with 30 aspiring and professional content creators—including Instagrammers, YouTubers, TikTok creators, and those seeking monetization through Pinterest and Twitter—we contend that their experiences are not only shaped by the *promise* of visibility, but also by its *precarity*. As such, we present a framework for assessing the volatile nature of visibility in platformized creative labor, which includes unpredictability across three levels: (1) markets, (2) industries, and (3) platform features and algorithms. After mapping out this ecological model of the nested precarities of visibility, we conclude by addressing both continuities with—and departures from—the earlier modes of instability that characterized cultural production, most especially the guiding logic of platform capitalism.

Keywords

platforms creative labor algorithms visibility social media metrics

Introduction

In the spring of 2020, as the global pandemic began to wreak havoc on contemporary labor markets and economies, a number of high-profile publications began to prognosticate the fate of a relatively new category of cultural producer: platformized creative laborers. Rather hyperbolically, a feature in *Vanity Fair* headlined, “Is this the end of influencing as we knew it?”

(Bryant, 2020). *Wired*'s Arielle Pardes, meanwhile, forecasted the uncertain career prospects for professional Instagrammers given that “brand deals have dried up; sponsored posts have been delayed” (Pardes, 2020). Other analysts speculated the similarly fragile career trajectories of those pursuing paid opportunities on YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok—the latter of which was mired in controversy with a rumored sale and threats of political bans in both India and the United States. In an *MIT Technology Review* report on the platform's shaky future, Abby Ohlheiser (2020) summarized, “Whether the app goes or stays, this moment is forcing creators...toward a realization that making, or even consuming, things on the internet means depending on platforms that could change drastically in an instant” (para. 5). Then, in a nod toward the fickle algorithmic systems that structure creator-centric platforms, she added, “Small algorithmic changes by a platform can make or tank an entire career” (ibid).

Taken together, such reports underscore a fundamental reality of careers borne on social media: they are profoundly volatile, bound up with fluctuations in wider socio-economic, cultural, and political realms. Such instability, of course, well predates these platforms; that is, careers in the creative industries have long been marked by intermittent or piecemeal work, low and/or deferred wages, and the cautionary mantra that “you're only as good as your last [gig]” (Blair, 2000; Deuze & Prenger, 2019, Gill, 2010; McRobbie, 2016). Indeed, more than fifteen years ago, Neff et al. (2005) described how new media workers face patterned “uncertainty and lack of control” --forms of risk offset by what workers view as “the promise of one Big Job being right around the corner” (p. 319). But today's platformized creative economy—powered by a neoliberal ethos of self-commodification, the recasting of independent employment as “entrepreneurship,” and an oversaturated supply of talented hopefuls—amplifies many of these less auspicious features (Glatt, 2021; see also, Bishop, 2019; Duffy, 2017). In this paper, we call

attention to a particularly acute source of such unpredictability--namely the much-hyped ideal of social media *visibility*--by offering an ecological model to assess its impact on creative laborers and their work.

Notions of visibility carry hefty analytical weight in contemporary writings on platforms (e.g., Bucher, 2012; 2019; Gillespie, 2018; van Dijck & Poell, 2013) and platformization (e.g., Helmond, 2015; Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Bucher's (2012) exposition of a Foucauldian "regime of visibility" governed by the logic of algorithmic systems is especially relevant to the present study. But while Bucher's initial formulation focused on the experiences of social media *users*, the stakes of being rendered *visible*--or conversely, *invisible*--are intensified for *platformized creative laborers* given that the latter's material gains are hitched to metric success (Glatt, 2021). Through a case study of creative workers on Pinterest, Klawitter and Hargittai (2018) argue that, in the digital economy, these kinds of workers "are more incentivized than most in understanding how [algorithmically curated] feeds decide what to display to users given that their livelihood directly depends on such exposure" (p. 3504). Similar conclusions have been drawn from studies of creative workers across other platforms, most notably Instagram (Cotter, 2019; O'Meara, 2019; Petre et al, 2019; Arriagada & Ibanez, 2020) and YouTube (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Bishop, 2018; 2019; Caplan & Gillespie, 2020).

Despite the rich insights of this work, these studies tend to focus on creators' experiences with a particular platform—a trend which has elided attention to the role that cross-platform branding logics (e.g., Scolere et al., 2018) play in the production of digitally mediated personae.ⁱ Moreover, given the cultural industries' decades-long reliance on metrics as proxies for quality and mechanisms for feedback, it seems necessary to develop a perspective on visibility that acknowledges the broader forces that have historically impacted creators in traditional cultural

labor contexts. Accordingly, this study sought to develop a broad ecological understanding of how creators working on multiple social media platforms imagine the visibility of the platforms on which they create and circulate content, with particular attention to the impact on their processes and products. Data for this project included in-depth interviews with 30 aspiring and professional platformized creative laborers—including Instagrammers, YouTubers, TikTok creators, and those seeking monetization through Twitter and Pinterest. These interviews were conducted across a span of more than two years; hence, they provide insight into creators' experiences with visibility across key moments amid what Arriagada & Ibanez (2020) describe as the continuous stages of *platform evolution*.

Our findings reveal that not only do the challenges of maintaining visibility extend to the digital economy, but that both the *promises* and *precarity* of such visibility are amplified in platformized labor contexts. We posit, moreover, that creative laborers experience unpredictability across three levels: (1) Markets--that is, evolutions in audience tastes, advertiser demands, and sources of competition; (2) Industry--or evolutions in the ecology of platforms on which creators produce and circulate content; and (3) Platform features and algorithms--namely evolutions in the platforms themselves, including those overt changes (e.g., new features) and more opaque changes (e.g., changes to the algorithm). As we show, these levels are deeply interwoven, underscoring the need for an ecological model of precarities. After offering such a model to help illuminate the *nested precarities of visibility*, we conclude by addressing both continuities with and critical departures from the earlier modes of instability that characterized creative work. That is, while cultural producers have long reckoned with the unpredictability of market demands and audience tastes, today's precarity is largely an upshot of platform capitalism (Srnicsek, 2017), rendering creators beholden to Silicon Valley's every whim and vagary.

Creative Labor in Context: Metrics, Measures, Markets

As academic writings on and firsthand accounts of Instagram influencers, YouTube creators, and professional bloggers attest, social media content creation is a category of labor that—while novel—bears a marked resemblance to work in the legacy media and cultural industries (Duffy, 2017; Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Glatt, 2021). Accordingly, it seems important to trace the roots of the “new modalities of visibility engendered by new media” (Bucher, 2012, p. 1164) to earlier systems of measurement that scaffolded traditional fields of cultural production. Accounts of the “digital reputation economy” (Hearn, 2010; Gandini, 2016), for instance, underscore how today’s fetishization of likes, favorites, and shares has important precursors in earlier systems of ranking and rating cultural products. Hearn (2010) contextualizes digital quantification imperatives in highly circulated inventories of success, such as “best seller lists and popular music charts.” Gillespie (2016), meanwhile, notes that media industry participants have long deployed “both subjective assertions and manufactured metrics about what’s popular, what’s about to be, and what should be” (p. 62; see also, Baym, 2013).

As such patterned references to *popularity* indicate, audience size has long served as a significant--albeit deeply fraught--barometer of cultural tastes. And, correspondingly, the increasingly specialized mechanisms of audience measurement that developed in the second half of the 20th century shaped both the content and format of media systems (Turow, 1997). More pointedly, the metric systems furnished by Nielsen, the Audit Bureau of Circulation, and companies of their ilk engendered what analysts have productively described as “industrially constructed images of the audience” (Ettema & Whitney, 1994; Turow, 1997). As the language of constructionism attests, the media and advertising industries’ conceptions of audiences were

understood as cognitive shorthand; creators thus treated them as suspect, at best. For instance, Gitlin (1983) details prime-time TV executives' deep ambivalence toward audience ratings. Amid the industry's increasing mandates for "hard knowledge" through concept testing, social research, and Nielsen ratings, TV workers became--paradoxically—ever more attuned to the "*limits* of this knowledge" (pp. 31, 42-43). Less than a decade later, Ang (1991) argued that the TV industry's incessant quest to lure audiences was itself a symbol of the "unknowable" nature of audiences. Consequently, the television institution was "[haunted by] a constant sense of uncertainty." (p. 18).

These and other accounts of legacy media industries make clear that cultural producers' charged relationship with audience measures--and wider systems of quantification--presage the rise of algorithms and Big Data. But in recent years, the availability of data engendered by digital media has significantly impacted the production, circulation, and monetization of cultural content (Poell, 2021). As we show in the following section, logics of personalization (i.e., content created for "an audience of one") and ubiquitous algorithmic culture are at the forefront of assessing this impact.

Visibility in Platformized Cultural Production

While contemporary newsrooms have been described as "traffic factories" (Petre, 2015), entertainment-based industries are increasingly reliant on automated systems of demand prediction and evaluation (e.g., Napoli, 2014). Such a robust reliance on quantification can be understood as both a cause and symptom of the so-called platformization of the cultural industries, defined by "the economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms" into these industries along with interrelated shifts in their labor, creativity, and democratic provisions (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Poell et al., 2021). It is against this backdrop that

scholars have examined how metric logics are shaping the experiences and output of platformized workers across the news (e.g., Christin, 2018; Petre, 2018), music (Baym, 2018; Prey, 2018), and television (Lotz, 2014) industries. Importantly, the command to pursue quantified indices of visibility is no longer the exclusive province of complex organizations like newsrooms and TV studios. Amid an individualized digital creative economy, metric evaluations are increasingly legible at the *personal* level, most notably through social media platforms. In 2013, Baym described the rapid uptake of social media by cultural producers as evidence of a “larger shift toward the markers of profitability...less tied to production and *more tied to reputation*” (2013, n.p., see also, Hearn, 2010; Gandini, 2016). She added, “[I]t has also become important to measure audiences in order to *assess social values* such as legitimacy, credibility, likeability and other kinds of status that can presumably (if mysteriously) be converted into economic capital” (italics added, *ibid*).

Among the sites where such metric “assess[ments] of social values” are not just discernible but, rather, instrumental, is in platformized creative labor. Here, current and aspiring cultural workers are roused to pursue quantifiable markers of visibility--from likes and favorites to shares and comments--in earnest (Bishop, 2019; Duguay, 2019; Glatt, 2021; Petre et al., 2019). A number of studies in this vein have focused on Instagram influencers and aspirants; scholars have thus described Instagrammers’ felt obligation to engage in “visibility labor” (Abidin, 2016); to play “the visibility game” alongside algorithms and platforms owners (Cotter, 2019); to “optimize their visibility” (O’ Meara, 2019); and to adhere to gendered prescriptions of the “visibility mandate” (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Studies of the YouTube community, meanwhile, detail creators’ efforts to evade “the threat of invisibility” (Bishop, 2019; see also Bucher, 2012)

while accommodating platform logics configured by “visibility, metrics and hierarchy” (Glatt, 2021; see also, Cunningham & Craig, 2019).

Collectively, such accounts make clear that visibility is a requirement for career success in platformized cultural industries, and metrics are the central axes on which power and resources are exchanged—in the form of sponsorships, brand deals, collaborations, and so forth. Many of these works, moreover, underscore the role of (perceived) algorithmic systems in configuring creators’ level of visibility—often in ways that are lopsided, if not outright biased (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020; Glatt, 2021). Algorithmic systems are dynamic by definition; as such, the nature and extent of their impact seems to change at whim, alongside other forms of so-called platform evolution (Arriagada & Ibanez, 2020). Such changes often necessitate that content creators “adapt their brand subjectivities and practices across platforms and affordances” (ibid, p. 2). As such, it seems critical to assess the impact of visibility across a broad timeframe and, we would add, across the span of creator-centric platforms, given the guiding logic of cross-platform branding (Scolere et al., 2018; Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Glatt, 2021).

Method

This project involved in-depth interviews with 30 aspiring or professional platformized creative laborers—including those who create and circulate content on Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, and TikTok.ⁱⁱ Interviews focused on workers’ experiences creating and circulating content in platform contexts, including their pursuit of visibility and their understanding of the forces that aided or impeded this pursuit. To recruit participants across platforms, career levels, and content genres, we relied upon three concurrent strategies: 1) directly contacting people who positioned themselves as knowledgeable about social media

visibility in creative work, 2) directly contacting those who publicized their experiences with creative labor on or through platforms, and 3) utilizing a snowball sampling approach to solicit additional potential participants at the completion of each interview. While most of our study participants tended to devote their time, energy, and labor to a particular platform, the majority found it necessary to maintain a brand presence across the wider social media ecology--a theme to which we return in the findings section. Additional details on interviewees--all of whom were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy--is available in the Appendix.

The interviews took place over a span of more than two years (early 2018 through late 2020). Collecting data across multiple years proved generative to the study, in part by providing insight into creators' experiences across key moments in the evolution of platforms. Some of these moments emerged as especially salient to creators' pursuit of visibility; among them were Instagram's continuous tweaks to its algorithms and its decision to "hide" likes; political controversies that sullied the reputations of Twitter and Facebook; and the rapid uptick in TikTok use attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Due to the geographically dispersed nature of our sample, interviews took place over Skype and/or the phone and were audio recorded with participants' permission. Interviews followed a semi-structured interview protocol; most lasted between 30 minutes and an hour. At the completion of the interview, participants received a stipend (\$25 USD) in exchange for their time and insight, and interviews were sent to a professional service for transcription. The study's authors independently read all of the transcripts and met regularly to discuss themes that emerged inductively (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Together, the collaborators developed the coding categories and applied focused codes to the larger datasets. Finally, the researchers discussed the focused codes and organized them into overarching themes, which are discussed below.

Findings: The Promise and Precarity of Visibility

Given the logic of visibility that propels the social media economy, it is perhaps not surprising that participants detailed inclinations to have their content “seen,” to “build an audience” and “get attention,” to craft “posts that get more traction,” and—to use an oft-repeated euphemism for metric success--“do well.” Crucially, such motivations were overwhelmingly cast in terms of *professional* advancement--rather than *personal* self-interest. For example, James distinguished career-minded TikTok creators like him from those social media users who “post something, and [when] they get a lot of likes, or a lot of engagement, it gives [these users] an ego-boost, but I don’t think they really care about it.” To James, “car[ing]” about the number of likes meant being strategic about one’s content and the attention it draws.

In chronicling their pursuits of visibility, participants offered wildly different metric targets (i.e., “hit a thousand [likes] for every picture” or “5,000 followers before my birthday”). Some, like Instagrammer Naina, sought to reach follower- and engagement- thresholds that she expected would lure brand sponsors. She explained, “If you can get a 50 percent engagement rate...that’s probably so much better to a brand.” Others, meanwhile, discussed how achieving metric benchmarks would enable them to curry favor with platform companies, particularly in cases where the latter supplied creator-centric funding initiatives. Olys, for example, shared her belief that her fellow Instagrammers sought to reach 10,000 followers in order to take advantage of platform features. “Once that number hits 10k, whether your followers are organic or not, you can fully take advantage of having a business account.” To Olys, this was a key impetus for those who engaged in ostensibly surreptitious practices, such as “buying followers” or other ostensible efforts to *game the system* (Petre et al., 2019; Ziewitz, 2019). Several TikTok creators,

meanwhile, called attention to the platform's standards for admittance into its buzzy Creator Marketplace.ⁱⁱⁱ Of his future goals on the platform, Eric offered: "I would love to increase my followers, definitely. Because once I hit 100K, I can then join the Creator Marketplace which will help me get into what I really want to do which is, like, working with brands, promoting products, and being an influencer..."

Despite such concerted efforts to boost their visibility, creators expressed frustration when their content failed to register what they considered a successful impact on audiences. In recalling what drove her to TikTok, Kavianah offered, "I just really couldn't understand why [my numbers on Instagram weren't increasing]... I feel like I'm not being *seen*." Together, such accounts underscore a fundamental axiom of platformized creative labor, namely that it is structured by both the *promise* and *precarity* of visibility. Participants attributed such unpredictability, moreover, to a patterned set of external factors--from the whims of audiences to platforms' notoriously inscrutable algorithmic system. In what follows, we show how these factors were embedded in structures of precarity at three levels: (1) *Market precarity*, or the volatile changes in audiences' tastes and advertisers' demands; (2) *Industry precarity*, or uncertainty that stemmed from the hyper-competitive and oversaturation ecology of creator platforms; and (3) *Platform precarity*, or the changes enacted by individual platform companies in the form of updates to their features and algorithms. Although we present these levels discreetly, evolutions in markets, industries, and platforms are by no means disconnected. Rather, as we show in the conclusion, they are constitutive of what we propose as the nested precarities of visibility.^{iv}

Market Precarity: Audiences, Trends, Social Shifts

Interview participants spanning platforms and genres offered a similar perspective on the market for social media content: it was fickle, elusive, and, ultimately, difficult to predict what would “do well.” As James noted of the erratic nature of popularity on TikTok: “I think it’s just about what people are watching, what they want to see, and what they identify with.” He added, “As a creator, that’s the hard part: ‘What are people going to engage with? What’s gonna resonate with them?’” Cooper, meanwhile, used the language of *lost control* to describe the uncertainty of content visibility on TikTok:

It’s hard to predict [what will get attention]. You don’t know. So, I’m always like, “Once I post a video, it’s out of my hands. I have no control.” I’ll do everything I can when I’m creating a video to make sure that this is as entertaining as it possibly can be as the content that it is, but beyond that, I have no control.

As a buffer against such uncertainty, creators relied upon metric data from past content as well as analytics provided by the platforms. As aspiring Instagram influencer Eva shared, “I’m starting to learn more about my audience and what they want, and that works better for me too in terms of growing.”

Angela, similarly, noted how members of Instagram’s creator community tend to invest their energies in content most likely to “go viral”; she clarified, “[it’s] the kind of stuff that is getting just a jillion likes.” Angela suggested that certain types of content--such as images that repurpose popular movie quotes--are especially likely to ratchet up metrics, but she also added the following caveat: “that changes over time.” Renee, accordingly, noted how she shifted the focus of her Instagram account toward wellness content to tap into what she described as “the big yoga/meditation trend going around the world right now.”

Despite creators’ reliance on forms of data on audiences and “trends,” such knowledge was deemed ineffectual at especially transitory social moments. Indeed, the volatility of market

trends was brought into sharp relief during our final round of interviews, as a number of creators detailed the presumed impact of the coronavirus and Black Lives Matter protests. James, for instance, recalled how in response to the Black Lives Matter protests, “they [TikTok] were pushing out videos from protest. They were pushing [content from] Black creators.” While James lauded the platform’s decision to “amplify [marginalized] voices,” he acknowledged this was likely a business decision. “Whatever is relevant, and trendy, in that moment, I think that they adjust the algorithm...to push that stuff out more.” As we discuss in a later section, such algorithmic “adjust[ments]” were a key source of unpredictability.

Other TikTok creators, meanwhile, noted how pandemic-related stay-at-home orders led to an unexpected boost in their metrics. Nickolas, for instance, recalled the “influx” of creators on TikTok: “[There were creators hopping on the platform, especially during quarantine....I’ve seen teachers, doctors, other educators, and other medical professionals on the platform.” To him, the culture of the platform underwent a marked evolution during this time:

It used to be an app just for jokes, like people would lip sync to songs, and it would primarily be a dancing app where everyone pretty much would post dancing videos. But I would say right now it’s sort of evolved to where you can find a wide variety of content on the app. And I guess more people posting educational content has really helped...it has definitely changed throughout the time that I’ve been on the app.

Despite the unprecedented surge in usage of the platform, Nickolas explained that many brands remained reluctant to invest in advertising. He explained, “some brands are still not considering TikTok as a viable platform to market on.” Nolan, by contrast, offered a different perspective on advertisers’ assessment of the short form video app: “[Brands]...just saw potential that the younger generation on here has...The creators influence them a lot, so they probably saw a lot of potential just on TikTok, just because it’s a new platform.” Such comments make clear that the

precarities of markets--especially those that impact the visibility of creators--reflect wider external forces, including audiences, advertisers, and the wider social context for cultural goods.

Industry Precarity: Ecology of Platforms

At the same time that participants described the instability of ebbing and flowing markets, they also noted the unpredictable nature of the platform ecology. Over a span of mere years, some creator-centric platforms like TikTok and Triller launched or evolved while others (i.e., Vine) seemed to vanish overnight. During our second wave of interviews, Eva noted how the ever-changing nature of individual platforms led to reconfiguration of the wider social media ecology.

[Constant change is] just something you have to agree to when you start using these things. And accept things are always gonna change, social media changes all the time...So, you either just get really angry at Instagram and Facebook changing and stay with the platform, or you leave. And right now, there hasn't been enough of a different platform that has changed up the space to get people to move over there.

Inadvertently, Eva seems to presage the rapid uptick of TikTok; accordingly, several of our interviewees noted how creators had abandoned Instagram's over-saturated community for the short-form video platform. Recall, for instance, the earlier mentioned content from Kavianah who moved from Instagram to TikTok because--in her words-- I feel like I'm not being *seen*." Josie, similarly, noted how many creators saw their visibility decline at the hands of Instagram and subsequently rechanneled their creative energies elsewhere. As she explained during our 2020 interview:

Even to this day, a lot of people are still annoyed at Instagram and have moved over to YouTube and TikTok because [Instagram] is not a sustainable career...Instagram is one of the most penalized and probably the least favorite because of just the way [its algorithm] was changed in 2017.

An even greater threat was that the platform on which creators had built their brands would vanish without warning. Naina, for instance, expressed a concern that Instagram could “fail” at any time, leaving users without access to audiences and advertisers. She added... “If you don't have a backup plan, you're done. You're gonna have to work at McDonald's, because [you don't have other] experience probably and all you're gonna be able to say is, ‘Oh, I had 500,000 followers.’”

TikTok creators seemed especially attuned to this type of precarity, especially given that we conducted interviews at a time when the platform's future in the US was irresolute. Cooper recalled countless comments from his audience in anticipation of such precarity, such as “Oh, I really hope TikTok doesn't get banned. I'll miss you.” However, he was positive that he would find another way to reach his audience, saying, “I'm like, ‘I'm not going anywhere. I'm a human being. I will still exist. I will still make my content. It just won't be on TikTok.’” While Cooper was rather optimistic about his future in content creation, the majority of our interviewees noted how unpredictable variations in the broader industry ecology were frustrating at best; angst-inducing at worst. Like Cooper, they expressed a felt need to have an alternate course of action to fall back should their platform of choice fail. As Nicholas put it, “I believe TikTok is not very future-proof at its current state. And many creators, if they can't really make a living, then they might just move on to other platforms.”

As such comments attest, creators believed that the production of a cross-platform brand was a way to better withstand the vicissitudes of the platform ecology (see also, Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Glatt, 2021). As Nolan offered as to why he was also creating content on sites like YouTube and Instagram:

You've probably seen on the news too about the potential TikTok ban, everything happening with the app, with China....So, kind of given me a wake-up call to try and not focus so heavily on one platform, even though I'm doing so well, and to try and have

audience on multiple platforms just in case my account gets banned, something happens, stuff like that.

While this strategy may be a bulwark against the instability of the platform ecology, it places an additional burden on creators in the form of further investments of time, energy, and creative attention.

Platform Precarity: Features and Algorithms

As the above-mentioned comments suggest, changes in a particular platform that drove end-users (and presumably, advertisers) to a competing platform were among the catalysts for evolutions in the social media ecology. And, indeed, our interviewees discussed the disruptive nature of platforms' continuous and oft-unannounced "updates." While these changes collectively added to the precarity workers felt, some--such as new features--were more overt and easy to discern, whereas others--particularly algorithmic changes--were more opaque and thus harder to reckon with.

Changes in Platform Features

Platforms evolve at a breakneck pace (Arriagada & Ibanez, 2020); such changes command creators to continually adapt, swapping yesterday's way of doing things for tomorrow's anticipated rollout. Interviewees expressed frustration that when a platform announced a change to their features, communication was often unclear, leaving creators with more questions than answers. Neve explained that in 2018, Pinterest advised creators on best SEO practices saying, "the first five pins that you save during the day will have the biggest priority." She continued, "One week [later], they changed their mind. They removed that line from the 'best practices' page. And now about six months later, the best practices page has been

completely rewritten, changed, and it doesn't even exist. Now it's called 'content tips.'" That any platform decision may be abruptly reversed was an additional source of stress and uncertainty for creators. Such capriciousness, Neve concluded, has creators "worried about it...people are really confused about what Pinterest wants."

Some of the Instagrammers we interviewed were exasperated with the company's decision to add "Stories" and, more recently, remove public likes from many accounts. Although Olivia recalled initial frustration at the former feature, she learned to adapt:

When it [Instagram stories] first came out, I was like, "This is stupid, I'm not doing this, it's just something else [to do]. I've never used Snapchat, but I found it was like that and I was like I don't need another social media platform or element to use. I already have enough....[but it] has turned into a habit that I literally do every single morning.

TikTok creators, meanwhile, expressed confusion about changes in the TikTok Creators Fund--a program which, similar to the Creator Marketplace, promises to help members of the community monetize their content. The guidelines are notoriously vague, and interviewees thus offered different accounts of the guidelines. While some explained a qualification of having "10,000 followers or more," others believed admittance was based on garnering "10,000 views or more in the past 30 days." As Kavianah explained:

A lot has changed since I first joined in April and a lot of it has to do with that TikTok Creators Fund...It's got people really looking at the content that they [put] up, looking at their analytics, looking at their follower gain because, I mean, you're getting paid for your [hits] on that, so it's making everyone really want to make sure that they're being seen...

Together, interviewees seemed to suggest that platform changes caused a lot of uncertainty in the creator community, even if they were more overt and easy to discern than changes to the algorithmic logic.

Changes in Underlying Algorithms

In addition to changes in overt features, interviewees discussed the challenges of navigating platforms' algorithms, highlighting the role of such "inscrutable" systems in amplifying the precarity of platformized creative labor. While Angela noted how Instagram's algorithm, "constantly, constantly changes," Eva explained, "Instagram doesn't really share what goes into making an algorithm. They tweak it whenever they want, and then sometimes they announce it, sometimes they don't...People just start noticing that things are happening." To her, such changes were economically motivated: "If they [Instagram] can change the algorithm to help make more money, then they will make that choice." Given the opaque nature of changes, many creators discussed them as a source of frustration, particularly as they required additional time and labor to "keep up." As Grace put it, "Instagram's algorithm is constantly changing and it's a pain in the ass to keep up with." One way she adapted to the new algorithm was by reciprocal commenting that she hoped would make her own content more visible. "I spend just like a complete hour right after I post, just like on Instagram, liking and commenting on other people's pictures and responding to comments."

Cooper's discussion of the TikTok algorithm was remarkable similar:

Something that's worth noting is the unpredictability of the algorithm on TikTok. It's not always super consistent, and for some reason, you'll go through a week or two where your views are half of what your views are in other weeks. And even if the production of your content – the quality – isn't changing....

Elizabeth summed up, "It seems like nobody really has a firm understanding of how [the algorithm] works or what it means. I think the lack of transparency isn't really good for anyone

in that case.” Nancy, who had experience creating content for YouTube in the past, even opted to abandon the platform entirely because, in her words, “the algorithms there are seemingly impenetrable.”

Some of our interviewees came to understand the impact of algorithms in cases of perceived punishments. By punishments, we refer to cases when workers believed their profile was concealed from their audiences—making them less visible and, as such, less valuable (Petre et al., 2019; Caplan & Gillespie, 2020). It is often algorithms that are flagging profiles or content that ostensibly do not meet the community guidelines. As Neve noted, “Pinterest can block a very legit blogger for nothing, just like ... Really for nothing.” Yara, meanwhile, described it as “kind of ridiculous that you have to take these super careful, extreme measures to not get punished by Instagram.”

A more fraught practice was being “shadowbanned” on a platform, which users understood to mean that the platform was concealing their content without notifying them. As one interviewee explained, “You’re not told...your followers might go down a bit, and your views aren’t as high as they used to be, but you’re never specifically told like, you’ve been shadow banned.” Josie TikTok said, “I’ve been shadow banned probably five times in the past year on four different accounts I launched...The algorithm makes mistakes...they sometimes will literally ban you for no reason because they think you’re doing something violent.” One site where concerns about shadow-banning circulated was in the context of TikTok’s earlier-mentioned Creator Fund. After getting accepted into the Fund, Kavianah noted, “It’s not as easy for you to show up on people’s following pages as it was before, that you have to work harder to

get on the “for you” page.” Eric, too, suggested that participation in the Fund might make creators less visible. There’s “definitely a correlation between joining the Creator Fund, and views, and videos, and everything not doing as well.” Yet because these shadow banning decisions are not transparent, some questioned whether it was even real. As Colt described, “TikTok is such a random platform. One video will get 5 million views, and the other video will get 200. So, it’s easy to say that you’re shadow banned, or TikTok doesn’t like you, if all of your videos don’t do that well. But I don’t think it’s [shadow banning] that prevalent, if it even does exist.” Yet most agreed that with something as nebulous as shadow banning or other algorithmic punishments, workers have little recourse.

Despite this lack of formal recourse, users still tried to ameliorate uncertainties and mitigate the impact of algorithms. Elyse indicated that algorithm changes are to be expected and creators must learn to adapt: “I don’t think the algorithm changes can be predicted, nor should they be resisted -- in terms of SM marketing, it’s just a case of being super nimble and quick to change.” Thus, much like ordinary users who rely upon algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2017) or “folk theories” (de Vito et al., 2017; Eslami et al, 2016) to make sense of purportedly “black-boxed” algorithmic systems, cultural producers developed and circulated platform-centric algorithmic theories in earnest. To Neve, Pinterest’s most recent algorithm change reflected the platform’s wish for “content creators to push more fresh content.” She explained, “Instead of re-pinning their popular pins, they want us to create almost every day some new images. Which is frustrating in a way, that you cannot just create some piece of content, even a beautiful image, send it to the platform and then leave it there.” Nickolas told us about a theory that he has been

employing on TikTok, “I hear a lot of people say that using music in your videos helps with the algorithm, so TikTok recommends it to more people.”

These folk theories indicate how many creators went beyond mere acknowledgment of algorithms to fundamentally orienting themselves to anticipate the incessant tweaks and oft-unforeseen updates of algorithmic systems. They had to reckon with the volatility of algorithmic systems as this is increasingly understood as a *necessary part of the job* (Author, 2020). Angela oriented herself to these changes by speculating that “the basis of the Instagram algorithm is really about trying to show people the content that they want to see and keep people on the Instagram platform as much as possible. And so, kind of knowing that, you can kind of think about the different ways that Instagram might do that, and different rules they're gonna put in place to make that happen.” Yet still, these changes caused frustration and uncertainty, adding to this overall sense of platform precarity.

Discussion and Conclusion: Instability, Intensification, and Inequality

We're kind of all at the whim of whatever these companies want us to do. And sometimes they're privately owned, sometimes they're publicly owned companies, but they're still companies whose main goal is to make money. -Eva

It has been nearly four decades since media sociologist Todd Gitlin (1983) described TV producers' fraught attitudes toward industry ratings: the quantifiable figures supplied by Nielsen and the American Research Bureau that promised to “predict the unpredictable” were simultaneously fetishized and trivialized (p. 31). This idiom—*predicting the unpredictable*—remains apt today amid the data-driven platforms, predictive algorithms, and the wider forces of

platformization that are reconfiguring the cultural industries (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Poell et al., 2021). Indeed, our interviews with platformized creative laborers—those who use platforms and also, crucially, direct value-generating attention to them—reveal how their experiences are profoundly wrought by such unpredictability. *Visibility*, as we have shown, is a key vector of such instability; creators vie to boost their likes, views, favorites, and shares, while simultaneously trying to mitigate the threat of being rendered *invisible* (see also, Bucher, 2012; Bishop, 2019).

In an effort to more clearly identify how in/visibility gets manifest as unpredictability in the platformized creative economy, we offer an ecological model of the *nested precarities of visibility*. Through the idea of nestedness, it becomes clear that any form of change—be it the “rupture” of a new algorithm (Devito et al, 2017; Petre et al; 2016) or something that reshuffles the industry ecology—cannot be understood discretely; rather, precarity is enclosed in wider regimes of instability—much like multiple nested Matryoshka (Russian) dolls. Working from the outermost layer, we contend that market forces structure the ecology of platforms, which in turn shape the decisions of individual platform companies; together, these interconnected forces guide the experiences of individual creator-subjectivities. As the accounts of the Black Lives Matter movement and CoVID-19 make clear, unanticipated shifts in wider culture can trigger sweeping changes in the platform ecology as well as more acute changes in a platform’s algorithm.

In assessing the multiple, interconnected levels on which creators experience precarity, it seems necessary to reiterate that structures of instability have deep roots in the media and cultural industries, where “job insecurity” is a characteristic feature (e.g., Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2013; Gill, 2010; McRobbie, 2016; Neff et al., 2005). Interviewees’ accounts of fickle audience tastes and curious market vicissitudes are not dissimilar to those chronicled in earlier

studies of media workers (e.g., Gitlin, 1983; Ang, 1991; Turow, 1997). But the individualized, data-driven nature of cultural production and consumption has exacerbated such metric unpredictability. The rate of change, too, seems to have accelerated, guided by Silicon Valley's siren call to "move fast and break things." As one of our interviewees (Josie) aptly noted of the breakneck pace of algorithmic changes, "By the time TikTok discloses, or anyone figures [the algorithm] out, it changes again. So, it's really hard to keep up with everything."

Accordingly, while cultural producers have long sought to appease audiences and advertisers, today's platformized creative laborers are also—and, perhaps, *primarily*— beholden to platform companies—those that hold a perverse level of power in contemporary culture and society (van Dijck et al., 2018). Interviewees' efforts to win favor with platforms by, for instance, hitting metric benchmarks or engaging in actions that will (hopefully) stave off punishment are not merely expressions of professional self-interest; instead, they reveal how creators are enlistees in the broader systems of platform capitalism (Srnicsek, 2017). Eva's above-mentioned comment about being "at the whim of whatever these companies want us to do" suggests that, when it comes to their understanding of platforms, creators are less blinkered; more duty-bound.

Here, it seems important to call attention to the algorithmic systems that govern visibility on platforms. These systems—as considerable research has helped to lay bare (e.g., Noble, 2018; Gillespie, 2018; Bishop, 2020)—are far from "fair." For instance, in their analysis of YouTuber's experiences of demonetization, Caplan & Gillespie (2020) describe how the system of governance is shaped by "different users, different sets of rules, different material resources and opportunities, and different procedural protections when content is demonetized....[all of which are] different from the expectations of fairness creators bring to the table" (p. 2). Our

findings highlight other forms of unevenness in the creator economy. To be sure, some creators benefit from this lopsided system, especially when an unexpected boost in visibility generates career windfall. But most experience visibility as both a source of promise *and* precarity. The newly formed cottage industry selling “tricks” and “hacks” to game the algorithm (Chan, 2019; Bishop, 2020) attests to this. But it is important to consider who has the time, energy, and financial resources to leverage strategies of growth and visibility (Klawiter and Hargittai, 2018; Cotter, 2018; Petre et al, 2019). Put differently, the systems are not merely inscrutable (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016) but, rather, they are more or less scrutable.

In closing, we call for additional insight into how the provision of visibility in platformized creative labor is allocated. Already, the kind of algorithmic punishments we have discussed have drawn wider attention given that they disproportionately impact women, racial/ethnic minorities, and the LGBTQIA community (Bishop, 2020; Glatt, 2021). For members of these groups, the precarities described above are likely further exacerbated, and we see a focus on their experiences as a key avenue for future research in this space. After all, any nested system of precarities is ultimately embedded within a social structure that is far from stable.

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ⁱ Exceptions to this platform-specific tendency include Glatt’s (2021) recent study of cross-platform labor; Cunningham & Craig’s (2019) account of social media entertainer’s desire to produce brands that span platforms; and Duguay’s (2019) study of laborers on Vine and Instagram.

ⁱⁱ We acknowledge both substantial variation and overlap in the categories “aspiring” and “professional.” We use the former to refer to those starting to pursue professional opportunities, and the latter to refer to those who are reliant on platform labor for all or the majority of their income.

ⁱⁱⁱ TikTok’s “Creator Marketplace” is open to creators who meet a number of requirements, including having at least 10,000 followers, and provides creators with the opportunity to develop collaborations with brands and monetize their content.

^{iv} In a review of literature, we found that Bakker Kellogg (2018) uses the term “nested precarities” to describe the wider structures in which academic precariousness is embedded.