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Sex in the shadows of celebrity

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ABSTRACT

Shadowbanning is a light censorship technique used by social media platforms to limit the reach of potentially objectionable content without deleting it altogether. Such content does not go directly against community standards so that it, or the accounts in question, would be outright removed. Rather, these are borderline cases – often ones involving visual displays of nudity and sex. As the deplatforming of sex in social media has accelerated in the aftermath of the 2018 FOSTA/SESTA legislation, sex workers, strippers and pole dancers in particular have been affected by account deletions and/or shadowbanning, with platforms demoting, instead of promoting, their content. Examining the stakes involved in the shadowbanning of sex, we focus specifically on the double standards at play allowing for 'sexy' content posted by or featuring celebrities to thrive while marginalizing or weeding out posts by those affiliated with sex work.

Sexy displays have been ubiquitous in media culture for decades, as in film, pop music and advertising. Since the 2010s, sexually suggestive, semi-nude and nude photographs shared on social media have become standard in the making and maintenance of celebrity image. From belfies – bottom selfies – to photographs featuring deep cleavages and breast-cupping by the likes of the Kardashians and the Hadids, all the way to Playboy's pixelated yet visible nipples, snippets of strip club-themed music videos and promotions of celebrity OnlyFans accounts, mainstream social media (semi-)undress is as visible as it is lucrative in generating tabloid articles, clicks and commercial brand partnerships (Romano 2018; Malone Kircher 2020). As social media have grown key to where and how attention clusters in popular media, both established and aspiring celebrities make use of platforms – and especially of Instagram – in fashioning their presence in the public eye, displaying their bodies in the process.

Bodily displays on social media are nevertheless not moderated equally. Sex workers and pole dancers in particular are often affected by account deletions and/or shadowbanning, with platforms demoting, instead of promoting, the visibility and accessibility of their content (Bond 2019; Are 2020d; Blunt et al. 2020). Given the importance of social

media as a promotional space, moderation practices disproportionally impact sex workers and pole dancers who risk being deplatformed or not being seen and heard, and whose possibilities to achieve influencer status are constrained in concrete ways. The discrepancy between sexy celebrity posts left to thrive and photographs posted on accounts affiliated with commercial sex and/or nudity being hidden raises important questions about how social media platforms value different users and the content they create. Consequently, this forum piece inquires after the inequalities that the banning and shadow-banning of sex on social media highlight and amplify.

Shadowbans

Shadowbanning refers to how platforms 'hide or deprioritize content without informing the user' (Suzor et al. 2019, 1531). The term originated in the early 2000s, when moderators of internet forums such as Something Awful began to diminish the reach of those joining forums to troll others (Cole 2018). As a light yet debated censorship technique, shadowbanning is used by social media platforms to limit the reach of potentially objectionable content without deleting it altogether on Facebook (Zuckerberg 2018), Twitter (Stack 2018), TikTok (Joslin 2020) and Instagram (Are 2020d) alike. At present, users whose profile or content becomes shadowbanned receive no notification on the issue, and may not even be aware of it. However, following years of widespread complaints, social media platforms like Instagram have promised to further clarify the reasons behind the shadowbanning of an account and to send notifications when it happens (Mosseri 2021).

A shadowbanned social media account may, for example, not be found through the platform's search functions even as it remains fully operational for the account holder and accessible through a direct link. Shadowbanned posts can be made invisible to users not following the account in question, and can therefore garner no additional likes, comments or shares. Such posts do not go directly against community standards so that they, or the accounts in question, would be outright removed. Rather, these are borderline cases open to interpretation: spammy behaviour such as bulk liking, following or commenting may result in shadowbanning, as can visual content that is deemed risqué by human content moderators, automated filtering tools or fellow users.

On the one hand, platforms prioritizing – and hence necessarily also deprioritizing – the visibility and accessibility of content without user awareness is simply routine, as these choices are already algorithmically governed in the experience of each user's newsfeed (for example, Bucher 2018; Karppi 2018). On the other hand, the shadowbanning of sexual content is part of a broader pattern where nudity, sexual communication and content broadly associated with sex are systematically governed and deplatformed, so that the forms of sociability afforded by Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Tumblr grow increasingly void of sex (Paasonen, Jarrett, and Light 2019; Blunt et al. 2020) – unless the said content is posted by celebrities sheltered by their public positions.

Lucrative sexiness is key to the making of online celebrity and influencer careers, just as it plays a central role in celebrity culture more broadly – the extraordinary success of Kim Kardashian being merely one example (Tiidenberg 2017; Drenten, Gurrieri, and Tyler 2020). Celebrity bodies are valuable for social media platforms in attracting followers and ramping up the traffic of data upon which their economies depend: consequently,

the threshold for governing the bodily displays of celebrities is higher than the one concerning photographs by lay people. Content posted by adult OnlyFans account holders, strippers and porn performers, or by recreational pole dancers, has posed additional challenges as platforms aim to protect their brand image from 'NSFW' associations in order to remain lucrative towards advertisers – something OnlyFans themselves have not managed to solve, given their move to ban all explicit content from October 2021 following pressure from their payment providers, only to make a U-turn following bad publicity following the announcement (Cooper 2021). This decision, which drastically cut down potential revenue sources of those doing online commercial sex work and further delimited their public visibility, is yet another example of the challenges platforms face while managing lucrative sexiness.

The management of sexual content through content removal, blocking and shadowbanning ultimately revolves around notions of value: the value placed on different kinds of content, exchanges and users within the social media economy. Platforms moderate content both in order to not offend users and, centrally, in order to attract advertisers. Like all commercial media, social media sell audiences to advertisers keen to place their messages in contexts supporting, rather than conflicting with, their brand image. Companies mostly do not want their adverts to appear next to nude or sexually explicit photographs, and hosting such content can also project negatively on the platform in question so as to injure its market value. Although sexual content attracts user engagement, faring well in the social media attention economy, it holds questionable monetary value for platforms operating through the mining, analysis and selling of user data for the purposes of targeted advertising. Questionable in its monetary value and variously labelled as objectionable, sensitive or NSFW, sexual content is extensively moderated, easily removed and, akin to obscenity, undeserving of protection in the name of freedom of expression (Pilipets and Paasonen 2020; Spišák et al. 2021).

Practices like shadowbanning make evident the different value placed by platforms on the bodies of their individual and collective users, the bodies of sex workers being seen as particularly expendable, or even worthless. Shadowbans take different shapes depending on the platform. In 2018, Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg defined shadowbannable content as 'borderline' in toeing the line of acceptability set by the company, even as it can attract high user engagement. In his Blueprint post related to Facebook community standards, Zuckerberg (2018) defined nudity as objectionable and hence prohibited, and content bordering on nudity as necessitating shadowbanning, stating that the platform's algorithms had already proactively identified 96% of the nudity they took action against. 'Photos close to the line of nudity, like with revealing clothing or sexually suggestive positions, got more engagement on average before we changed the distribution curve to discourage this', he added, failing to define what exactly 'revealing clothing' or 'sexually suggestive positions' mean for Facebook.

For its part, Twitter prevents shadowbanned accounts' usernames from appearing in searches (Stack 2018) while TikTok hides accounts from its news feed, as highlighted by black creators throughout 2020 (Joslin 2020). Perhaps even more notorious is the Instagram shadowban, which has affected artists, performers, activists and celebrities since 2019: pictures and videos that the platform deems inappropriate are hidden from the app's Explore page, so that creators are prevented from reaching new audiences (Cook 2019, 2020). As a result of shadowbans, Instagram has had to apologize for restricting

content related to Carnival dancers (Taylor 2019) and pole dancers (Are 2019b), among others. The photograph sharing platform initially sternly denied the existence of shadow-bans (Are 2019a; Cook 2020), only to aptly bury an admission of using this technique in their 2020 #BlackLivesMatter pledge to amplify the visibility of black creators (Are 2020a).

The gradual yet persistent and extensive removal and hiding of sexual displays and exchanges leads to the shrinking of spaces for diverse sexual cultures, practices and communities, and disproportionately hurts marginalized people, sex workers included (Molldrem 2018). As Katrin Tiidenberg and Emily van der Nagel argue, 'this deplatformization of sex is a result of cold calculations cloaked in emotional, moralizing language' that tap into lingering moral panics concerning mediated sex 'which have reinforced the dubious moral status of sex and popularized the trite diagnosis of technologically mediated sex as deviant' (Tiidenberg and van der Nagel 2020, 46–47).

Scrubbing it out

The shadowbanning of sex is partly an effect of the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (FOSTA/SESTA), an exception passed in 2018 to Section 230 of the US Communication Decency Act, which has kept online services immune from civil liability for the actions of their users. Reversing the principle with regards to content related to sex work, FOSTA/SESTA has effectively rendered platforms liable for the content posted on them (Constine 2019; Tripp 2020). In order to comply with FOSTA/SESTA, social media platforms have been censoring an increasing amount of content to avoid being seen as facilitating sex work, while also reworking their community standards to ban sexual communication and depictions of nudity and sexual activity. In the course of this all, commercial sex workers need to balance ever shifting yet increasingly narrow lines of conduct, with the threat of shadow-banning or more permanent ousting looming close by – so much so that a community report by Hacking/Hustling identifies 'content moderation, shadowbanning, and denial of access to financial technologies' as parallel to the violent policing that sex workers are subject to on the streets (Blunt et al. 2020, 6).

After the approval of FOSTA/SESTA, online spaces for nudity and sexuality began to shrink – from Tumblr's 2018 'porn ban' that removed sexual communities developed over a decade (see *Porn Studies* Forum in Vol. 6 no. 3) to Reddit's removal of escort and 'sugar daddy' subreddits, after the classified site Backpage had already banned sex adverts the previous year (Blunt and Wolf 2020). In the aftermath of FOSTA/SESTA, Instagram accounts by porn stars have been deleted (Fabbri 2019), just as TikTok has been removing accounts by sex workers producing content on OnlyFans while leaving Only-Fans celebrity account holders in peace (Dickson 2020).

FOSTA/SESTA is one example on the global impact that legislation specific to the USA has on social media use. The notion of community standards has been used in judging the obscenity of cultural objects since the 1957 Supreme Court ruling *Roth v the United States*, concerned with 'whether to the average person, applying contemporary community standards, the dominant theme taken as a whole appeals to the prurient interest' (Hudson 2018). Despite the rationale of community standards being regionally and culturally specific, Facebook alone currently has some 2.8 billion users. This lends the platform unprecedented power to govern social exchanges and to limit the accessibility of the

content posted on a global scale, independent from local legislation governing sex work or pornography in the countries where its individual users reside. Facebook's expansive approach to sexual content moderation means that there is no room for culturally varying approaches to nudity, any more than there is for considerations of context: classic nudes, kink props, nude artworks and belfies are all in more or less explicit conflict with community standards due to their pictorial content.

Social media platforms nevertheless seem somewhat at a loss in drawing the boundaries of lucrative sexiness and objectionable content. In order to define the criteria for acceptably sexy lingerie and swimwear photographs in their advertising policy document, Instagram and Facebook have reportedly used Victoria's Secret catalogue as a template, explaining in 'twenty-two bullet points the way models can sit, dress, arch their backs, pose, interact with props, how see-through their underwear can be, how the images can be cropped and where their ads can link to' (Salty 2019). Leaked memos for the platform's moderators discussed 'What are the indicators of female breast squeezing?', stating that 'Covering, cupping, or pressing the breast with palms or straight fingers' is allowed, unlike a 'grabbing motion of the female breast or clothing' (Gilbert 2020). Such sexiness, the parameters of which confine to narrow and commercial views of physical attractiveness long promoted by the brand of Victoria's Secret, holds value for Facebook as 'sticky content' that attracts views, shares and likes while also being acceptable for advertisers. This results in the platform crafting norms of acceptability excluding that which falls outside such lucrative sexiness: the communication of sexual likes, attempts of hooking up and more explicit sexual displays are all weeded out.

As Salty's writers note, Instagram's rules governing appropriate swimwear and underwear are all specific to bodies marked as female. As algorithmic bias meets, and is amplified by, sexist bias, the results are disproportionately harmful for those already marginalized: 'Sex can be sold for the benefit of major corporations like Instagram, Facebook and Victoria's Secret – but NOT for the benefit of sex workers, and/or women, trans and nonbinary people themselves' (Salty 2019).

Differently valued bodies

Applied to the accounts of average users, sex workers and aspiring influencers, but not to those of more established celebrities, shadowbanning makes evident the opacity of social media community standards and other in-platform laws, as well as the unequal ways in which they impact different users. Even as the 2019 Hollywood film *Hustlers* depicting strippers and strip club scenes and starring Jennifer Lopez, for example, was heavily advertised on Instagram and Facebook, real-life strippers and pole dancers were shadowbanned on, and their accounts removed from, the same platforms (Bond 2019).

Both shadowbans and more drastic moderation practices have affected the lives and livelihoods of sex workers, artists, activists, athletes, queer brands and accounts (Akpan 2020), not least in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic where much of mundane communication has shifted to social media platforms, amplifying their overall importance. Meanwhile, celebrity accounts are allowed to post content testing the boundaries of acceptability due to the lucrative value they hold for advertising platforms (Fabbri 2019). As Nick Srnicek (2017, 45 and 95) argues, advertising platforms entail a tendency for monopolistic growth in that the more users they have – the more data they collect

and the more valuable and monopolistic they grow – the more competitive they become. A platform with some billion users, such as Instagram, is then 'better' than one with only a million in offering more content and possible contacts. Within this economy, a celebrity account with more than a hundred million followers, such as that of Cardi B, Jennifer Lopez, Miley Cyrus, Nicki Minaj or any of the Kardashian/Jenner sisters, is similarly 'better' than that with a more modest following: they attract attention, fuel engagement and increase the platform's overall value. Here, more is more – and becomes more – as the visibility of influencer status breeds further in-platform and cross-platform visibility through trending, shares and algorithmically made recommendations, mirroring the monopolistic logic of the advertising platforms in question.

Double standards pertaining to sexy displays on social media are, obviously, embedded in social norms governing things considered acceptable and morally dubious that again tap into the mechanisms of value generation. Within this monopolistic logic, mainstream celebrities trump sex workers by default, just as sexiness compatible with advertising interests trumps content more difficult to monetize. Consider, for example, Facebook and Instagram's 2020 community standards, which target the 'coordination of or recruitment for adult sexual activities' including 'strip club shows, live sex performances, erotic dances' as well as language that indicates 'a state of sexual arousal (wetness or erection)' or 'an act of sexual intercourse'. These are all elements of popular music videos and celebrity entertainment richly available on the platforms in question; yet, if posted by sex workers, posts containing these elements are likely to result in the content being banned (Are 2020b).

As this example shows, in-platform laws comply with US legal constraints while also being clearly in excess to them – by, for example, banning the promotion of erotic dance. Facebook's (2020) community standards further recognize the importance of discussions on sexual violence and exploitation but 'draw the line, however, when content facilitates, encourages or coordinates sexual encounters or commercial sexual services between adults such as prostitution or escort services. We do this to avoid facilitating transactions that may involve trafficking, coercion and non-consensual sexual acts.' In accordance with FOSTA/SESTA, Facebook arguably aims to curb trafficking, even as this policy prohibits content encouraging or coordinating 'sexual encounters' both in the context of commercial sex and outside it (see Tripp 2020). Within the content policy, no distinction is drawn between consensual and non-consensual sex work. Discussions on sexual violence and exploitation are seen as important, whereas the communication of sexual preferences and likes is not. This speaks loudly of value judgements concerning the social role and importance of sex – and that of commercial sex in particular. No space is left for consensual sexual exchanges of the commercial or non-commercial kind, even as these are likely to unfold through Facebook's very own dating app.

Shadowbanning is a prime example of how social media companies' self-identification as platforms clashes with user expectations of what can and cannot be done on them. Tarleton Gillespie (2010) argues that the notion of platform is a conveniently generic moniker for social media companies to present themselves as tools to give the public a voice, as opportunities for advertisers to reach more people and as spaces where users themselves – and not the technology companies – are responsible for the content they post. This way, platforms appear virtuous and useful but, crucially, not overly responsible for any conflicts caused by their users. With the passing of FOSTA/SESTA House bills, the

chasm between user expectations and the priorities of social media companies concerning sexual content has grown. While users of all kinds (possibly naively) expect social media to perform a civic role as public spaces, platforms' premediated damage control, combined with their imperative to appeal to advertisers, highlight their founding interest in making money (Are 2020c).

Social media content that holds no obvious monetary value for the platform, or that which may be difficult to monetize by falling on the borderline shadowlands of the 'vaguely inappropriate' (Constine 2019), becomes hidden or removed so that its personal, cultural, social, artistic or political value is left with little room to resonate. As we have argued, the issue does not merely pertain to pictorial content as it can be algorithmically identified (see Zuckerberg 2018), given that photographs posted by celebrities are treated differently from those by sex workers even when being virtually identical in their poses or degrees of nudity. The issue is equally one of how differently these bodies are valued and, indeed, how some of these bodies fail to be valued at all.

Sexy celebrity bodies promoting brands, films, pop songs and/or their own brand image are lucrative in appealing to users and advertisers alike, and in supporting the platform's own visibility, status and brand. In contrast, in expensive interpretations of FOSTA/SESTA, sex workers are seen to sell their bodies and to advertise their services merely by virtue of their social media presence. This presence then becomes seen as problematic as such – even if the services that they promote, such as stripping, are legal in many countries, the USA included. This article has argued that sex-related, sex worker and generally 'nude' social media accounts are seen as disposable and their content as (at least) borderline objectionable, so that their shadowbanning is framed by platforms as an issue of general, albeit ephemeral, 'safety' and public good. In reality, however, social media's governance of sex seems as tied to the monetary value (or lack thereof) platforms place on it as it is to such unclear notions of safety.

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