"Sexual Context Collapse" on TikTok: Platform Politics, Content Moderation, and User Agency in Platform Governance

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the mechanisms of governance and political interaction on TikTok, focusing on the intricate processes governing the creation and regulation of sexual content. It scrutinizes the interconnections of user agency, performative acts, and the dominant power frameworks that shape the terrain of sexual politics and corporeal rights. By integrating insights from Digital Media Studies, Socio-Technical Studies, and Political Science, the dissertation situates the production, mediation, and regulation of public social media content within the nexus of sexuality and technology. Utilizing a multi-method qualitative approach, the study meticulously intertwines prolonged observation spanning two years, video content analysis of one thousand TikTok videos, and semi-structured interviews with seventeen creators of sexual content. The findings reveal a tension between individual creativity and platform governance, shedding light on the intricate balance between digital autonomy and censorship in the contemporary domain of human sexuality and social media. Another key contribution of the study is the development of the "sexual content spectrum" typology and the "sexual context collapse framework," which can be instrumental theoretical frameworks for dissecting sexual content and its contextual nuances on platforms like TikTok. The dissertation enriches our comprehension of content creation and moderation as facets of social media platform governance, underscoring the urgency for transparent and equitable moderation practices amidst the rapidly evolving technological landscape and changing socio-sexual paradigms.

Dedication

To the creators who challenge boundaries,
May your courage and resilience continue to inspire a future of equitable, democratic platform governance and enlightened discourses on human sexuality.

Table of Contents

Abstract **ii**
Dedication **iii**
Table of Contents **iv**
Chapter 1: Introduction **1**
1.1. Sexual Context Collapse in the Politics and Governance of Social Platforms 1
1.2. Dissertation Outline 11
1.3. Unmasking the Research Problem 17
1.4. TikTok: An Empirical Field of Study 25
1.5. Conclusion 34

Chapter 2: Literature Review **37**
2.1. Platforms, Platformization, and Platform Studies 37
2.2. Platform Power 50
2.3. Platform Politics 54
2.4. Platform Governance 58
2.5. Platform Users 64
2.6. Deplatformization and Deplatforming: Navigating Digital Exclusion 70
2.7. Conclusion 79

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework: Sexual Context Collapse in Platform Politics and Governance **81**
3.1. Embodied Performances, Governmentalities, and Context Collapse in Platform Governance 82
3.2. Sexual Context Collapse in Platform Politics and Governance
3.3. Sexual Contexts on Social Media: Collapsing, Colliding, Colluding, and Condensed 93
3.4. A Content Spectrum of Sexual Contexts 104
3.5. Case Study: TikTok's Sexual Context Collapse 111
3.6. Conclusion 114
118

Chapter 4: Research Methods **120**
4.1. Qualitative Mixed-Methods: Interviews, Content Analysis, & Observation 120
4.2. Data Analysis Methods: Triangulating Qualitative Methods 133
4.3. Assumptions and Limitations in the Research Design 136
4.4. Conclusion 155

Chapter 5: A Typology for the Sexual Context Spectrum **156**
5.1. The Sexual Content Spectrum on TikTok: A Typology 160
5.2. General Sexual Content: Education, Entertainment, Advocacy, Expression, and Seduction 166
5.3. Community-Driven Contexts: Colluded Contextualized Content in Distinct Sexual Communities 205
5.4. A Typology of Sexual Content on TikTok and Its Implications for Platform Politics and Governance 235

Chapter 6: Experiences, Understandings, and Influences of TikTok's Sexual Content Creators **242**
6.1. Platform Politics and Governance and Sexual Content Creators on TikTok 242
6.2. Experiences of Sexual Content Creators on TikTok 243
6.3. Understandings: Perceptions and Interpretations 258
6.4. Influences: User-Agency in Shaping Platform Governance 270
6.5. Conclusion 284

Chapter 7: Conclusion **287**
7.1. Examining the Experiences, Understandings, and Influences of Sexual Content Creators 288
7.2. Implications of the Research Findings 291
7.3. Impacts of Existing Sexual Content Moderation Policies and Procedures in Platform Governance 294
7.4. Curtain Call: (De)Platformization for whom? 299

References **303**

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Sexual Context Collapse in the Politics and Governance of Social Platforms

The digital landscape has been profoundly reshaped by the advent of social media platforms, transforming from open territories of unrestricted expression to sophisticated ecosystems governed by advanced technologies and intricate policy frameworks. This evolution has imbued these platforms with significant sway over both individual behaviors and the broader societal fabric, redefining modes of communication, information and value exchanges, and community building. In this context, the nuanced governance structures that underpin these platforms have become central to understanding their impact. As these digital spaces play an increasingly influential role in shaping public discourse, cultural trends, and even political movements, the imperative to dissect and comprehend the intricacies of platform governance has never been more pronounced. This scrutiny is not merely academic; it holds practical implications for policymaking, digital rights advocacy, and the ongoing dialogue around the balance between innovation, free expression, and the safeguarding of public and individual interests in the digital age.

The politics and governance of social media platforms--encompassing the rules, policies, and power dynamics that shape content visibility and user interactions--frequently attract critical examination from the public and academics. This scrutiny intensifies particularly when these governance frameworks intersect with content creators who navigate the complex realms of human sexuality. Amidst the rapid proliferation and professionalization of social media ‘content creators,’ there has been a subtle yet profound shift in platform governance approaches, particularly in content related to human sexuality—a realm historically at the intersection of culture, politics, and morality. As this dissertation will reveal, the policies and mechanisms implemented by these platforms often serve as a double-edged sword. While designed to streamline user experiences and uphold community standards, they can, paradoxically, marginalize the very groups that once thrived and contributed to their digital landscapes.

Empirical studies have shown that platform policies and governance strategies, while often intended to establish safe and inclusive digital spaces, can inadvertently marginalize certain types of content and creators, especially those dealing with sexual themes (Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Gorwa, 2019). This marginalization occurs partly due to the subjective nature of sexual context in content moderation policies, which are often ambiguous and inconsistently applied, leading to a lack of clarity for creators (West, 2018; Gillespie, 2018). Furthermore, algorithmic biases and the economic interests of platforms can also contribute to this uneven governance landscape, where certain voices and expressions are prioritized over others (Bucher, 2012, 2018, 2021). As a result, creators who engage with themes of sexuality, particularly those from marginalized communities, frequently find themselves disproportionately affected by these policies (Tiidenburg & Van Der Nagel, 2020). Their content is more likely to be restricted or demonetized, thus limiting their visibility and economic opportunities on these platforms (Tiidenburg, 2021; Are & Paasonen, 2021). This uneven application of policies and governance mechanisms highlights the complexities and challenges inherent in moderating digital spaces, often resulting in unintended consequences that reverberate through the creator community, particularly impacting those in already vulnerable positions.

Let us consider Tumblr's 2018 watershed decision to ban “adult” content from its platforms. Before this pivotal decision, the content-sharing platform Tumblr existed as somewhat of an online sanctuary for a diverse tapestry of creators and communities immersed in various facets of content creation related to sexuality and sexual expression. This ranged from amateur artists translating their intimate fantasies into evocative illustrations, to writers posting steamy or moving stories that explored queer love stories; from activists harnessing art and imagery to voice LGBTQ+ struggles and triumphs, to fetish communities curating spaces for safe exploration and dialogue. Additionally, educators and advocates found it a platform to dispel myths about sexuality, and many from marginalized or underrepresented sexual identities discovered camaraderie and validation through shared narratives and visuals. The platform, in its heyday, truly catered to a mosaic of voices that spanned the vast spectrum of human sexuality and identity.

Yet, in 2018, Tumblr found itself at the center of profound transformation. The platform, previously known for its liberal stance on content moderation, was engulfed by rising concerns over the presence of child pornography (Molldrem, 2018). These concerns were not unfounded: Tumblr admitted that its automated filters failed to reliably catch and remove illegal content, leading to the exploitation of its system. The breaking point came when Apple decided to remove the Tumblr app from its App Store after explicit child sexual abuse material was found on the service. ‘Apple's stringent policies around inappropriate content gave Tumblr little choice but to act decisively’ (Molldrem, 2018). With pressure mounting and the platform's reputation at stake, Tumblr announced a sweeping and stringent policy against "adult" content. Yet, this policy, in its attempt to cleanse the platform of problematic material, was akin to using a sledgehammer where a scalpel was needed. It was not just the flagrantly explicit content that was purged; the new algorithmic content filters lacked the nuance to discern between what was genuinely problematic and what was artfully or consensually expressive. As a result, myriad content that ranged from undeniable pornography to tasteful erotic art to poignant LGBTQ+ narratives and even historical artworks became casualties in this vast digital cleansing.

The fallout was immediate and intense. Creators who had spent years, if not decades, curating content and building communities, found their posts flagged or removed. In many cases, these were not just random posts but intricate tapestries of expression and identity, cultivated over time and resonating deeply with their followers. Artists, who used the platform as a conduit to monetize their work or even as their primary source of income, found themselves stranded. Discussions that centred on sexual health, awareness, and LGBTQ+ rights were stifled, further exacerbating the feeling of being silenced. Yet, it wasn't merely an economic setback for many. The platform's sudden policy shift in how it would govern its inter-mediation of content represented a larger, symbolic eviction from what many considered a digital sanctuary. These sexual content creators, diverse in their backgrounds, expressions, and narratives, suddenly found themselves at the margins, their spaces of community and dialogue snatched away. The digital diaspora that followed saw these creators scattered, seeking refuge in other platforms or worse, disappearing entirely from the digital realm.

Tumblr's ban on sexual content was not an isolated incident of deplatforming for platform sanitization, but a salient marker in a recurring trend: digital platforms, upon reaching a zenith of popularity, often recalibrate their content policies. In many cases, these policies lean towards homogenizing and sanitizing content, ostensibly to court advertisers or adhere to mainstream norms, or as a genuine pursuit of community safety. Yet, these recalibrations frequently alienate the very users who were instrumental in the platform's ascent — those who charted its cultural relevancy and bolstered its user base. It's a paradoxical trajectory wherein initial growth, usually spurred by diverse and niche communities like those of sexual content creators, culminates in their subsequent marginalization. This cyclical dynamic calls into question the sustainability and ethics of platform politics and governance, where foundational communities are often relegated to the periphery once a platform achieves mainstream status.

Drawing insights from the evolutionary trajectory of TikTok, a leading video-sharing social media platform, the intricate tapestry of platform politics and governance extends far beyond the realm of content moderation. As TikTok's global influence has surged over recent years, it has become evident that the focal point of analysis transcends explicit content moderation policies, delving into the concealed mechanics of its algorithms, interfaces, and technical architecture (Karizat et al., 2021). Notably, TikTok's algorithm, particularly through its *For You Page* (FYP) algorithm, wields unparalleled influence, profoundly shaping content discovery and user experiences in ways that diverge significantly from other platforms (Brennan, 2020). This centrality of algorithms in curating content introduces a multifaceted set of inquiries, ranging from their role in amplifying certain narratives to controversies surrounding the attribution of trends, where questions arise not only about content propagation but also the narratives and biases that emerge from such dynamics (Kang & Lou, 2022). As a result, TikTok's algorithmic mechanisms, technical attributes, and user interfaces have become focal points of extensive scrutiny and public discourse, revealing the intricate interplay of power, representation, and governance. This scrutiny is particularly pronounced in how these mechanisms influence the visibility and reach of user-generated content, reflecting broader concerns about fairness and transparency in digital governance.

A prime manifestation of this is the contentious content moderation practice known as 'shadow-banning'-- a content moderation strategy that subtly diminishes a user's content and profile visibility, often without their knowledge (Savolainen, 2022; Are, 2021). Shadow-banning represents a form of 'visibility moderation'—the process by which digital platforms manipulate the reach of user-generated content, either amplifying or suppressing it through algorithmic or regulatory means (Zheng & Kaye, 2022). A vivid example of this emerged in 2020 with calls from Indigenous activists on TikTok. Despite a significant following, these activists found that their videos addressing land rights and cultural heritage were consistently receiving low views and interactions (Gillezeau, 2020). This pattern suggests a subtle yet impactful form of content suppression. Moreover, TikTok has been criticized for suspending accounts that highlighted sensitive issues such as the detention of Uighur Muslims in China and the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States (Cave et al., 2020). A particularly disturbing revelation by *The Intercept* uncovered that TikTok's management advised content moderators to suppress content from creators deemed 'ugly, overweight, or disabled' (Biddle et al., 2020).

These examples highlight the intricate politics and governance mechanisms embedded in the content moderation practice of platform shadow-banning -- a form of governance through visibility brokering that can significantly impede critical discourse and mute marginalized voices. At its core, shadow-banning reflects a power dynamic where platform operators wield significant control over the visibility of content, often without transparency or accountability to the users affected. This practice, while ostensibly aimed at maintaining community standards, often lacks clear criteria and can be applied arbitrarily, leading to a form of digital censorship that disproportionately affects certain groups. By reducing the reach of content that challenges mainstream narratives or raises uncomfortable social and political issues, shadow-banning effectively undermines the ability of activists and advocates to leverage digital platforms for social change. This undermines the democratic ideal of digital spaces as forums for free and equal expression, revealing a governance structure that prioritizes platform interests and prevailing social norms over the voices of the marginalized. Such practices highlight the need for more

equitable and transparent content moderation policies that respect diverse perspectives and uphold the principles of digital freedom and fairness.

Building on the implications of shadow-banning, TikTok's algorithm, technical features, and interfaces have come to the forefront in discussions about power, control, and representation in digital spaces. This highlights the complex nature of platform politics and governance that extends beyond just surface-level content moderation policies. TikTok's algorithmic mechanisms, by covertly limiting the spread of content, can greatly influence the visibility of topics that confront the status quo or highlight significant social and political issues (Zheng & Kaye, 2022). Beyond the well-known phenomenon of 'shadow-banning', concerns have been raised about the platform's recommendation algorithm. Critics suggest that this algorithm fosters echo chambers by consistently providing users with content that echoes their existing beliefs, thereby potentially restricting access to a diversity of viewpoints (Gao et al., 2023; Flaxman et al., 2016). These practices, masked as efforts to optimize user experience, reveal the sometimes-discriminatory nature of algorithmically driven platform governance. Moreover, TikTok's primary interface, the FYP, has drawn criticism for its non-transparent content curation methods, raising questions about the criteria determining video virality (Simpson & Semann, 2021). Issues concerning data privacy to feed recommendation algorithms have also emerged, highlighting concerns about how TikTok manages user data (De Leyn et al., 2021). These various facets underline the intricate and often contentious nature of TikTok's attempts to balance technological innovation, user engagement, and societal implications within its governance framework.

Upon closer scrutiny of TikTok's algorithmic strategies and content curation practices, it is evident that the platform's governance transcends the scope of mere user experience enhancement. Empirical research indicates that these covert algorithmic and regulatory mechanisms on TikTok represent a deeper, potentially more calculated aspect of platform governance. Decisions made behind the scenes are not limited to the removal or suppression of posts; they crucially determine which creators and content are elevated, how user engagement is quantified, and which narratives are promoted or

overlooked. This form of governance implies a strategic shaping of the digital discourse, with tangible effects on the socio-cultural fabric.

Studies show that by elevating certain content and creators, platforms like TikTok can significantly influence the visibility of various issues, individuals, and ideologies (Gillespie, 2018). Further, the way engagement is quantified—through metrics like likes, shares, and comments—transcends passive measurement, actively influencing content reach and impact (Klonick, 2017). This approach to content management and promotion results in selective representation, effectively deciding which voices are amplified and which remain in the background (Van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018). While these practices may be framed as optimizing user experience, they point to a more profound narrative of control and influence within digital spaces. Research underscores the significant implications of these governance strategies, impacting not just individual creators but also shaping broader societal narratives and dialogues (Duffy& Meisner, 2023; Cunningham & Craig, 2019). Thus, TikTok's algorithmic and regulatory decisions emerge as influential factors in the construction of digital culture, bearing considerable repercussions for the diversity and richness of public discourse.

The 2020 'TikTok purge' serves as a potent empirical case that underscores these governance dynamics. During this event, a significant number of creators were deplatformed, particularly those with links to third-party applications like Only Fans (Dickson, 2020). This action, however, was marked by its uneven execution, raising pivotal questions about the subtleties and inconsistencies of platform governance. Notably, despite the stated rationale of targeting content linked to potentially erotic material, it was observed that creators with larger followings and more substantial influence often remained unscathed, their content largely untouched, despite being similar to that of the smaller accounts that faced penalization (Dickson, 2020). This selective enforcement exemplifies the complex ways in which platforms like TikTok navigate the dual objectives of curating a 'safe' user environment while respecting users' rights to expression.

Such instances clearly demonstrate how TikTok's platform politics and governance are not only systemic but also subject to selective application. Decisions are influenced by a combination of

algorithms, technical functionalities, and user interfaces, often resulting in a biased and non-transparent management of content and creator visibility. The 'TikTok purge', thus, becomes a revealing example of the broader trends in digital governance, where the decision-making processes and their implications on various users are reflective of underlying power structures and priorities within the platform.

While the decision-making processes and their implications within TikTok are indicative of internal power structures and priorities, it is crucial to recognize that these are also shaped by external forces. Governments, regulatory bodies, and broader socio-political dynamics play a pivotal role in influencing platform operators and their actions, thereby exerting a significant impact on how these digital spaces are governed and moderated. TikTok's content moderation policies, while shaped internally, are significantly influenced by external pressures and regulatory environments. For instance, Zheng (2022) highlights how government regulations and political pressures have a direct impact on TikTok's content moderation strategies. In countries with stringent internet governance laws, TikTok has been found to align its content policies closely with government mandates, often leading to the suppression of political dissent or culturally sensitive topics (Zheng, 2022). Additionally, as noted by Roberts (2021), global socio-political events, such as the Hong Kong protests, have influenced TikTok's moderation policies, with the platform facing allegations of censoring content that is politically sensitive to certain governments. These dynamic underscores the complex interplay between TikTok's internal governance mechanisms and the external political and regulatory landscapes in which it operates.

The interplay of platform politics and governance, particularly in the realm of sexual content, becomes increasingly complex when intersected with external legislative actions by state governments. A prominent example is the enactment of the *Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act* (FOSTA-SESTA) in the United States in 2018. Intended to combat online sex trafficking, the legislation's broadly framed provisions inadvertently criminalized the facilitation or promotion of prostitution online (Bronstein, 2021). This led to significant repercussions, characterized by Swords & Cook (2023) as 'the deplatformization of sex workers' from social media platforms. The impact of FOSTA-SESTA was immediate and extensive. Platforms such as Craigslist and Backpage.com scaled

back their services significantly, adversely affecting sex worker communities (Kennedy, 2018; Montgomery & Moon, 2018). Tumblr's implementation of a "porn ban" (Molldrem, 2018), Reddit's removal of escort-related subreddits (Brown, 2018), and the purging of accounts linked to sex work on Instagram and TikTok (Fabbri, 2019; Dickson, 2020) exemplify a broader trend of content platforms reacting to the legislation. Furthermore, the effects extended beyond content platforms to financial services, with payment processors like PayPal distancing themselves from sex workers (Stardust et al., 2023). These actions collectively resulted in the erosion of critical online resources for sex workers and exacerbated their marginalization and stigmatization (Blunt & Wolf, 2020). This case highlights the profound impact external regulations can have on the relationship between sex, technology, and digital platform governance, reflecting a complex web of power dynamics involving platforms, governments, and regulatory bodies.

The power politics and governance around sexual context in content on social media are also deeply entwined with the ongoing tension between sexuality's public expressions and societal mores and norms. From an interdisciplinary perspective, this tension reflects a complex interplay of power dynamics, public discourse, and media representation. Attwood and Smith (2018) in their study on 'Sex and the Social Media', argue that social media platforms have become battlegrounds where the lines between private and public expressions of sexuality are continuously negotiated. This negotiation is influenced by both platform governance mechanisms and broader social attitudes towards sexuality. On one hand, platforms like Facebook and Instagram have been critiqued for their stringent content policies that often censor sexual expression, reflecting a conservative bias towards public sexuality (Warner & Neville-Shepard, 2020). On the other hand, scholars like Gillespie (2017) highlight how platforms, by acting as gatekeepers, shape the discourse on what constitutes acceptable sexual content, thus exerting a form of socio-technical control.

From a political economic standpoint, Burgess and Green (2018) emphasize how economic incentives and advertising norms influence platform policies towards sexual content, often leading to the demonetization or suppression of content that does not align with mainstream advertiser preferences. In

the sociology realm, Paasonen (2021) discusses how these dynamics contribute to a 'sexual surveillance' culture on digital platforms, where users' sexual expressions are constantly monitored and regulated, impacting their online identity and agency. Collectively, these studies illustrate that sexual content on social media is not just a matter of individual expression but is embedded in a larger matrix of political, economic, and sociological forces that shape digital publicness and the governance of sexuality in media.

Collating these diverse perspectives paints a coherent narrative that unveils the intricate web of political challenges surrounding digital platforms within the realm of sexual content. It becomes evident that these platforms, once hailed as democratizing spaces of expression, often find themselves navigating a multifaceted landscape where intersecting dynamics of politics, legality, ethics, economics, and public perception intertwine. This landscape is marked by a continuous balancing act: platforms must negotiate between fostering open expression and adhering to legal and ethical norms, while also considering economic imperatives and public sensibilities. As a result, the governance of sexual content on these platforms is not merely a matter of content moderation; it involves a complex calibration of multiple stakeholders' interests and societal values. Such a calibration often results in compromises and conflicts, as platforms strive to maintain their status as open forums for expression yet are constrained by the necessity to operate within the bounds of societal norms and legal regulations. This tension underscores the evolving nature of digital platforms, reflecting a constant redefinition of publicness, privacy, and the boundaries of acceptable expression in the digital age.

Sexual content creators, who are both influencers and influenced within these digital platforms, find themselves at the heart of this complex interplay (Are, 2021). These individuals, who have established digital arenas for expressing their diverse sexual identities and narratives, face multifaceted challenges. On the one hand, they are subjected to the fluctuating dynamics of platform politics, which dictate the visibility and reach of their content (Gillespie, 2010). Practices such as abrupt content removal, account suspensions, shadow-banning, or the implementation of restrictive policies can significantly diminish their content’s influence (Savolainen, 2022). This reality underscores the role of platform governance as a determinant factor in either amplifying or silencing diverse voices and narratives, often

leaving sexual content creators in a vulnerable position with respect to their online expression and presence.

Concurrently, these creators, leveraging the democratic and discursive opportunities afforded by digital platforms, play an active role in shaping and responding to the governance dynamics they encounter (Velkova & Kaun, 2021). They navigate the maze of content regulations, engage with platform authorities, and continuously adapt their strategies to conform to the changing policies and algorithmic shifts. While some push the envelope to challenge and disrupt the status quo, others may conform to circumvent potential repercussions. This interplay between creators and platforms epitomizes the ongoing negotiation of power, redefining the boundaries and norms of sexual content within digital spaces (Tiidenberg & van der Nagel, 2020). These interactions are not merely reactions to the external governance pressures but are integral to the broader dialogue concerning platform politics, illuminating the intricate power dynamics at play in the governance of digital ecosystems.

The inherent problem in this landscape lies in understanding how these power dynamics, shaped by both internal platform governance and external regulatory forces, impact the lived experiences of sexual content creators. This includes examining the implications of these dynamics on their expression, visibility, and economic viability within digital spaces. The challenge is to dissect and articulate the nuanced ways in which platform policies, societal norms, and regulatory pressures converge, shaping not only the digital representation of sexuality but also influencing the everyday realities and rights of those who create this content.

1.2. Dissertation Outline

Social media platforms, at the intersection of innovation, community engagement, and occasional discord, play a critical role in shaping today's digital society. Within this landscape, the governance of these platforms emerges as a pivotal factor, directly influencing how users interact, express themselves, and navigate digital spaces. Central to the complex dynamics of these platforms is the concept of platform governance. Particularly fascinating are the political dynamics that arise when this governance intersects

with themes of sexuality, transforming platforms into battlegrounds of bodily representation, rights, and regulation (Tiidenberg, 2021). This dissertation aims to navigate these complex terrains by providing an in-depth analysis of the experiences of digital content creators who specialize in sexual content on TikTok. The research is driven by two primary questions:

1. *How do digital content creators involved in producing sexual content perceive, experience, and attempt to influence platform governance on TikTok?*
2. How *do their lived experiences, adaptive strategies, and actions both mirror and shape the broader dynamics of platform politics and governance on this platform?*

Led by these questions, the dissertation scrutinizes a variety of interrelated themes, such as: the socio-technical structures that underpin platforms; the concepts of platformization, deplatforming, and deplatformization; the complexities of user behavior and community development; the hierarchical nature and policies of platform governance and politics; and the nuanced, often controversial aspects of deplatforming, with a particular emphasis on the deplatformization of sexual content.

In addressing these questions and themes, the dissertation will adopt an analytical interdisciplinary perspective, aiming to unravel TikTok's governance complexities, understand the societal implications of 'sexual context collapse,' and shine a light on the broader political, socio-technical, and ethical contours of platform governance, especially as they relate to content moderation and deplatforming. The research underscores the assertion that platforms, TikTok being a prime example, transcend their technical foundations, embodying intricate socio-political ecosystems that cater to some while excluding others. The dissertation works to unravel the complex power dynamics of this and to explore the agency and challenges faced by these creators navigating it in this context. Through the narratives of content creators immersed in the realm of digital sexual expression, this study aspires to contribute to the academic discourse on the politics, power, and nuances of digital expression within the framework of platform politics and platform governance.

The subsequent chapters of this dissertation investigate the multifaceted dynamics of platform studies, drawing critical connections between concepts and their real-world manifestations within the

platform's ecosystem. This investigation is not merely confined to understanding platforms but seeks to unravel the intricacies of platformization - the transformative process through which traditional industries and spheres of social life become restructured according to platform logic. By examining the dual experiences of platform users and those who face deplatforming or deplatformization, this work spotlights the tangible consequences of platform governance decisions on both individual and collective fronts.

This introductory chapter, which lays the groundwork for the dissertation, aims to contextualize the research problem, setting the direction for the subsequent empirical investigation. Chapter 2 digs into a comprehensive literature review, sourcing insights from a rich tapestry of disciplines ranging from Platform Studies and Media and Culture Studies to Political Science, Digital Sexual Culture Studies, and Socio-Technical Studies. This literature review chapter serves as a bedrock, anchoring the dissertation in the vast academic landscapes and bridging multiple research terrains. It weaves a theoretical framework that not only addresses the overarching constructs of platform power and platform politics but also the nuanced perspectives of platform users and their navigation within platform ecosystems. By intertwining these concepts, the review paves the way for a deeper understanding of the empirical realities of the study. Through this approach, the literature review captures the essence of platform studies: the transformative power of platforms, the politics embedded within their structures, and the individuals and communities that oscillate between empowerment and marginalization within these digital arenas.

Chapter 3 of the dissertation focuses on addressing the gaps highlighted in the literature review, in order to develop a theoretical framework that enhances our understanding of the dissertation's contributions from a theoretical standpoint. The chapter draws on research in Performance Studies and a Feminist Studies to consider embodied performance and identity, exploring how the embodied nature of sexual expression influences its reception and interpretation. Additionally, this theoretical chapter examines studies on governmentality and ‘biopower’, investigating how power operates within the governance of sexual content on digital platforms. The chapter also explores the concept of "context collapse," which refers to the merging of diverse social contexts in digital spaces. Building upon these concepts, the chapter puts forth a theoretical framework centred around two key concepts: "sexual context

collapse" and the "sexual context spectrum." By incorporating these new concepts within the theoretical discussion, the chapter establishes a framework that embraces the complexities and nuances of sexual content on digital platforms. It provides a conceptual lens through which to examine the interplay between diverse sexual expressions, platform governance, and the broader socio-cultural dynamics within which digital sexual cultures operate.

Chapter 4 offers an in-depth exploration of the research methods employed for the empirical study. It introduces a mixed-methods, qualitative research approach that forms the foundation of the empirical investigation. The chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the data collection and analysis processes, which include interviewing with content creators, conducting content analyzes of video material, and engaging in prolonged field research. The methods of analysis used to interpret the collected data from the mixed-methods approach are also explained in the chapter. These analytical techniques offer a framework for making sense of the interview transcripts, video content, and field observations, facilitating the extraction of key insights and themes relevant to the research questions. Furthermore, the chapter probes the epistemological and ontological underpinnings that inform the selected research methods. This discussion highlights the theoretical perspectives that align with and support the chosen methods, deepening the understanding of the philosophical grounding of the study. These reflections provide transparency and contribute to the overall rigour and validity of the study. This chapter sets the stage for the subsequent chapters, enabling a thorough exploration and analysis of the empirical findings within the context of digital sexual cultures and platform politics.

Chapter 5 builds upon the theoretical framework established in Chapter 3 and applies it within the empirical context of TikTok, using the data collected from the research agenda. By merging the conceptual framework with the empirical findings, this chapter unveils a typology of sexual content creation on TikTok, or “the spectrum of sexual context”. This typology represents a modest contribution in understanding and unraveling the current approach to moderating sexual content on the platform. The typology provides a categorization of the forms and intentions of sexual content on TikTok. It goes beyond simplistic categorizations based solely on eroticism and acknowledges the multifaceted nature of

sexual expression within the platform's ecosystem. The spectrum presented in the typology encompasses a range of content types, including educational and advocacy-focused content, entertainment-oriented content, content aimed at seduction, and community-driven dynamics within sex work, kink, and fetish communities.

By acknowledging and analyzing the intersectionality of content types and creators' intentions, the typology captures the complexity and richness of the sexual content landscape on TikTok. It recognizes that sexual content serves multiple purposes, from providing educational resources and raising awareness to fostering entertainment and exploring personal desires. This typology challenges the binary approach often employed in content moderation, which tends to categorize all sexual content as either permissible or impermissible based solely on its explicitness. By introducing this typology, the dissertation reframes the discourse surrounding the governance of sexual content on TikTok. It highlights the need for platform policies and content moderation practices that go beyond a simplistic binary approach and instead recognize the diverse intentions, contexts, and values associated with sexual expression.

Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 build upon the typology established in Chapter 5 and apply it to the empirical data collected, addressing the central research question of the dissertation. Chapter 6 will research into the experiences, understandings, and influences of sexual content creators on TikTok. Through an in-depth analysis of the findings, this chapter explores various themes such as the creators' motivations, challenges they face, and how they navigate the platform's governance. It uncovers the complex interplay between the typology of sexual content and the lived experiences of the creators. Chapter 7 shifts the focus to examining the contributions of these creators to TikTok's platform politics and governance. This chapter investigates how the creators actively engage with and shape the platform's dynamics through their content creation practices, community building efforts, and negotiations with the platform's policies. By analyzing their interactions with the platform, the chapter offers insights into the power dynamics, agency, and resilience of sexual content creators within the context of TikTok.

Together, these chapters provide a comprehensive exploration and analysis of the nuanced dynamics of platform governance and its implications for sexual content creators on TikTok.

Examining the empirical data through the lens of the typology, Chapters 6 illuminates the diverse experiences and interpretive understandings of creators, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of sexual content on the platform and its intersectionality with the intentions of the creators. This in-depth analysis deepens our understanding of the complexities surrounding sexual content production and consumption in the digital age. Through their examination of the creators' experiences and contributions, these chapters contribute to a broader understanding of the sociocultural implications of sexual expression on the platform. They provide valuable insights into the diverse range of content types, community dynamics, and the larger societal impact of sexual content on TikTok. By centring the voices and experiences of the creators from an emic perspective, the chapters highlight the agency, challenges, and creative strategies employed by individuals navigating the landscape of sexual content creation within the platform's governance framework.

Chapter 7, the concluding chapter of this dissertation, revisits the central research question, delving into the insights garnered about sex-centric platform politics and governance on TikTok, along with their broader impact on sexual content and platform governance dynamics. This final chapter highlights the findings of the dissertation, illuminating the resilience and agency of sexual content creators and their communities in the face of these challenges. It posits that, while digital platforms ostensibly strive to cultivate open environments for user-generated content, they often, inadvertently, or not, marginalize or silence certain communities and types of content, particularly those related to sex. This marginalization is largely a result of sexual context collapse, which is characterized by a limited understanding and differentiation of the diverse aspects of sexual content and its creators, further exacerbated by overzealous and often unjustified practices of deplatformization and censorship.

This pattern, while evident in the digital realm, is not confined to it; it echoes a long-standing historical dialectic of platformization and deplatformization of sexual information, communication, and expression. This dialectic has been intensified by the vast scale and reach of digital platforms, coupled

with the increased power of platform gatekeepers in controlling content flow. The repercussions of these actions go far beyond the suppression of critical health information and diverse sexual identities and expressions; they also limit both traditional and innovative modes of sexual expression (Tiidenberg, 2021; Tiidenberg & van Der Nagel, 2020). The dissertation showcases how sexual content creators on TikTok adeptly use strategic and inventive approaches to circumvent and negotiate the platform's regulations, actively redefining the landscape for sharing and engaging with sexual content.

1.3. Unmasking the Research Problem

The research problem at the core of this dissertation is centered on the dynamic interplay of power, resistance, and negotiation within the politics and governance of sexuality, visibility, and agency on social media platforms. This study seeks to empirically investigate how these dynamics particularly impact and shape the experiences of sexual content creators. In the rapidly evolving landscape of social media, the governance policies and practices exert a significant influence on the visibility and viability of sexual content. These policies are not static; they are continually reshaped by a myriad of factors including platform-specific rules, societal norms, legal frameworks, and the active engagement of users and creators.

This research aims to unpack the complex layers of this governance landscape, focusing on the ways in which sexual content creators navigate, resist, and negotiate these power structures. The problem is multifaceted: on one hand, there exists a continuous evolution of platform policies that govern what is deemed acceptable or visible, directly impacting creators who engage with sexual themes. On the other hand, the creators themselves are not passive entities; they actively participate in and respond to these governance dynamics, often employing creative strategies to assert their presence and agency. This intricate scenario raises questions about the balance of power between platform operators and content creators, the implications of governance decisions on marginalized groups, and the broader socio-cultural and economic impacts of these dynamics.

Through this lens, the dissertation aims to shed light on the nuanced and often challenging reality faced by sexual content creators, whose work is frequently at the intersection of platform governance, societal attitudes, and economic considerations. This exploration is crucial for understanding not only the immediate effects on these creators but also the wider implications for digital expression, content diversity, and the shaping of public discourse on social media platforms.

In the mix of these forces, there emerges a "sexual context collapse." This phenomenon is characterized by the confluence of diverse sexual contexts, expressions, and intentions within a singular digital space. Given the inherently multi-faceted nature of human sexuality, which spans across a spectrum of intentions from advocacy to expression, from education to desire elicitation, such a collapse can lead to ambiguities in content interpretation and misalignment in audience expectations. The intricacies of sexual context collapse arise primarily from the platform's inability or unwillingness to differentiate between the myriad nuances of human sexuality that appear in content. When expressions that are educational or advocative in nature are indistinguishably placed alongside those meant purely for entertainment or desire elicitation, it can lead to a muddling of messages, intentions, and, crucially, audience reception. Furthermore, this lack of contextual delineation can inadvertently fuel stigma, misrepresentation, and misunderstandings around sexual content, thereby affecting content creators, consumers, and platform governance alike. The ensuing challenges of this collapse do not merely lie in content interpretation, but also profoundly impact the platform politics and policies around content moderation.

The term 'context collapse' has garnered considerable attention in platform studies, primarily referring to how digital platforms blend various social worlds and audiences into a singular online space. This phenomenon is accentuated by social media platforms, where different facets of one's identity are exposed to an amalgamated audience, resulting in the conflation of contexts that traditionally remained separate. While context collapse in its generic form deals with the challenges posed by these overlapping audiences and the consequent shifts in self-presentation, the dimension of 'sexual context collapse' introduces a unique set of intricacies. Sexual context collapse navigates the confluence of diverse sexual

expressions, motivations, and practices within digital platforms. Such a convergence amplifies the challenges associated with understanding, creating, and moderating sexual content. Here, the term doesn't just allude to the merging of audiences, but more critically, to the amalgamation of varying sexual narratives and contexts into a monolithic digital space. This, in turn, raises questions about how platforms discern, classify, and potentially moderate these varying expressions without homogenizing or marginalizing certain narratives.

While context collapse, in general, can be disorienting, the stakes of it rise exponentially when sexual content is involved. Sexuality, as a facet of human identity and expression, has historically been a domain of intricate norms, taboos, and sociopolitical dynamics. When platforms attempt to navigate such a landscape with broad-brush policies or algorithms, they risk inadvertently collapsing distinct sexual contexts into one, potentially oversimplified, category. This not only challenges content creators' agency in articulating their narratives but also problematizes the platform's politics and governance mechanism. The complexity is further intensified by cultural, regional, and individual variances in perceiving and categorizing sexual content. It is, therefore, not just about understanding content out of its intended context; it's about the manifold interpretations and implications such content takes on in a collapsed context, especially when overlaid with the prism of sexuality.

The relationship between media platforms and the portrayal of sexual content has historically been intricate and fraught with challenges. Over the years, as media platforms have evolved, so too have the ways in which they navigate, represent, and curate sexual content. In the early days of print and broadcast media, strict censorship codes, often influenced by societal norms and religious edicts, greatly restricted the portrayal of explicit content. The US *Hays Code* (1968) in early Hollywood, for instance, set strict guidelines on the representation of sex, necessitating filmmakers to use insinuation rather than overt portrayal (Nurik, 2018; Biltereyst & Vande Winkel, 2013). Similarly, newspapers and magazines were circumscribed in their depiction of sexuality, often relegating such content to obscured sections or relying on coded language. The advent of the internet in the 1990s ushered in a new era of freedom for content creators. Digital platforms became spaces where sexual content could be shared and explored

with fewer restrictions. As Gillespie (2010) notes in "The politics of 'platforms'," the very architecture of these platforms was designed to encourage user participation, leading to a democratization of content production and curation. However, this democratization also meant that platforms were now confronted with the imperative of managing content that spanned a broad spectrum of sexual expressions and contexts, demanding new forms of governance.

Platforms, in their nascent stages, struggled to strike a balance between freedom of expression and content moderation. Early internet platforms tended to have rudimentary or lenient policies on sexual content, largely due to their decentralized nature and the ethos of the open web. As the internet matured, centralizing forces, predominantly platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, began to establish more stringent moderation guidelines, reflective not just of the platform's ethos, but also responding to societal pressures, advertiser demands, and legal regulations (Gillespie, 2018). The evolution was not linear. At various points in this timeline, certain platforms permitted a liberal expression of sexuality, while others imposed restrictions. Websites like LiveJournal or Tumblr, for instance, became havens for specific sexual subcultures and expressions before undergoing policy shifts that affected these communities. These shifts were often precipitated by external factors such as changes in ownership, legal pressures, or the drive for profitability. Consequently, the landscape of sexual content governance on platforms has been marked by tension: between open expression and moderation, between commercial interests and community values, and between uniform policies and the diverse realities of human sexuality. This historical trajectory sets the backdrop against which modern platforms like TikTok navigate the intricacies of sexual content, inheriting both the challenges and the legacies of their predecessors.

Social media platforms like TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and others have rapidly transformed the way people communicate, express, and navigate their identities. This transformation is not just technological but deeply cultural and social, reshaping the boundaries of public and private spheres (boyd, 2010). The myriad of functionalities offered by these platforms—from video sharing to storytelling, from 'going live' to crafting intricate multimedia narratives—has led to the creation of spaces

that defy easy categorization. Unlike traditional media which could segment and target content for specific audiences, modern platforms bring together global and local, young and old, mainstream and fringe, all within a single digital space. The convergence of these disparate groups on a singular platform results in a dynamic where multiple 'contexts' are inevitably mashed together. Marwick and boyd (2011) coined the term "context collapse" to describe this phenomenon, highlighting the challenges users face when their various social contexts – family, friends, colleagues, publics—are merged into one.

Sexual content, in all its varied forms and expressions, exemplifies the challenges wrought by context collapse. On platforms like TikTok, one might encounter a diverse array of sexual content: a dance video with sensual undertones, an educational talk on sexual health, a heartfelt story about queer identity, or a comedic skit that leverages innuendo. Each of these pieces of content originates from different motivations, whether it be personal expression, education, advocacy, or entertainment. Yet, on the platform's stage, they can all coexist, sometimes harmoniously, and at other times, problematically. The complexity arises when these varied forms of sexual content, each deserving its distinct context, get viewed through the same lens. For instance, a video intended as an educational piece about LGBTQ+ rights can be misinterpreted when viewed outside its intended context, leading to unnecessary backlash or even platform sanctions.

This collapse of contexts is further exacerbated by platform algorithms that often prioritize engagement metrics over context, making it even more challenging to maintain distinctions between various forms of content (Gillespie, 2018). Furthermore, the design features of these platforms play a subtle yet profound role in this phenomenon. The 'like' button, the comment section, the share functionality—each of these tools can either amplify or distort the original context of the content. For sexual content creators, navigating this intricate web of audience expectations, platform design, and algorithmic whims becomes a task requiring immense skill and acuity. In essence, the digital platforms of today, with their flattened architectures and algorithmic curation, complicate the landscape of sexual content. The implications of this context collapse are not just academic musings but have tangible consequences for content creators, platform governance, and broader societal discourses around sexuality.

In the complex landscape of digital platforms, the moderation of sexual content stands as a contentious arena, reflecting broader societal debates and power dynamics. The governance of these platforms is not merely an exercise in maintaining community standards but is deeply embedded within wider political, cultural, and economic systems (Gillespie, 2018). With the advent of digital technologies, platform politics have significantly influenced the way content is disseminated, consumed, and understood. The intricate policies governing platforms often reflect a tension between freedom of expression and the necessity to maintain a certain degree of decorum. As Gillespie (2010) posits, platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok, while promoting themselves as open spaces for user-generated content, simultaneously exert control through their terms of service, community guidelines, and algorithmic filtering. Within this matrix, moderating sexual content becomes even more complex. The one-size-fits-all approach to content moderation often struggles to account for the vast array of sexual expressions that manifest on platforms, leading to situations where content that may be educational or advocacy-oriented is bracketed alongside explicit content, leading to its unwarranted removal or suppression.

The overarching challenge in navigating this terrain, as illuminated by Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández (2016), resides in the inherent complexities and uncertainties that revolve around the determination of what constitutes 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' sexual content within the context of social media platforms. These ambiguities stem from the intricate interplay of cultural norms, societal values, shifting attitudes, and individual perceptions, all of which contribute to the fluid and ever-evolving landscape of digital sexual expression. The delicate balance between enabling freedom of expression and safeguarding against potential harm and exploitation renders this matter multifaceted, demanding nuanced approaches that account for diverse perspectives while striving for responsible platform governance. As the digital realm expands and diversifies, these ambiguities continue to challenge both content creators and platform administrators in their quest to define and enforce content boundaries that align with their respective ethical, cultural, and commercial imperatives.

Furthermore, the decentralized nature of content moderation, which often involves human moderators across various regions, algorithmic filters, and user reports, can lead to inconsistencies in decision-making. As Roberts (2019) notes, the reliance on outsourced content moderation teams often brings in cultural and regional biases into decisions, potentially marginalizing certain expressions while privileging others. Complicating the scenario further is the commercial imperative. Platforms, driven by the need to maximize user engagement and appease advertisers, might err on the side of caution, leading to over-moderation of content that might be deemed controversial. Such practices can inadvertently push the boundaries of what is considered 'acceptable', leading to the erasure or marginalization of essential conversations surrounding sexuality, health, and rights.

These determinations, which feed directly into the politics of these platforms, are fraught with cultural biases, regional variations, and subjective interpretations. The policies that guide such determinations, which get baked into platforms' interfaces and features, often exhibit an opacity that makes it difficult for users to predict or understand enforcement actions. The arbitrary nature of some of these decisions can exacerbate the phenomenon of sexual context collapse. Specifically, when platform decisions are made without clear delineation or understanding, it fosters an environment where diverse sexual narratives and motivations are often reduced to oversimplified labels by the moderation mechanisms. Conversely, on the side of content creation, creators, recognizing the unpredictability of enforcement, might pre-emptively streamline their own narratives, embodying a politics that sidesteps potential platform pitfalls. This self-imposed narrowing is a direct response to the effect of the governmentalities set by platforms, causing creators to internalize platform norms and pre-emptively limit their expressions. Thus, the dynamics between ambiguous platform enforcement and the embodied politics of content creation further deepen the issue of sexual context collapse, erasing the intricacies and complexities of human sexual experiences on both ends of the spectrum.

Therefore, platforms, as central agents, infrastructures, and mediators of the public, necessitate critical analysis of their politics and governance, especially concerning the intricacies of sexual information and communication. Such scrutiny elucidates the ramifications of platform politics on user

agency, knowledge production, freedom of expression, and cultural narratives related to sex. The phenomenon of sexual context collapse, if not addressed, doesn't just impact individual content creators but also influences broader digital discourses and the socio-political fabric.

A significant outcome of this sexual context collapse is the potential sidelining of content creators. At its core, the implications of this collapse manifest as chilling effects on user expression, rooted in the uncertainties and power asymmetries in content creators' navigation of these digital arenas. The pervasive threat of deplatforming, invisibility, or misinterpretation becomes an omnipresent concern throughout the creative labour. Creators, especially those voicing marginalized or non-mainstream sexual narratives, face a dilemma: perform appropriately and self-censor to fit within ambiguous platform guidelines or embrace the risk of content removal (Common, 2020). This self-censorship is not just about omitting explicit erotic sexual content; it extends to avoiding entire narratives related to sex perceived as "risky" by platform algorithms or moderators. Such caution not only hampers the growth of digital discourse but also stifles innovative perspectives that enrich our understanding of sexuality. Conversely, the implications of deplatforming transcend mere content erasure.

For content creators who have intertwined their livelihoods, social identities, and advocacy efforts with digital platforms, the threat of content removal becomes more than a simple hindrance—it's a looming existential crisis. Economic dependency on these platforms translates to a direct link between content visibility and monetary sustenance; thus, deplatforming can jeopardize their very means of livelihood. Beyond financial impacts, these creators have often fostered communities and cultivated audiences who resonate with their narratives. Removal disrupts these established networks, weakening creators' abilities to engage, mobilize, and influence. Moreover, for those leveraging platforms for advocacy, deplatforming threatens to mute their voices, undermining their efforts to champion causes, influence policy, or shift cultural paradigms. This multidimensional risk—a blend of financial, social, and advocacy-related repercussions—intensifies the chilling effect, making creators more cautious and potentially less authentic in their expression, ultimately constricting the diversity and depth of discourse in the digital landscape.

Emerging from platform-induced anxieties, a pervasive sense of self-restraint among creators' risks engendering a digital space characterized by imbalances in representation. Such an environment can marginalize alternative or minority voices, curbing the variety and depth of sexual expressions available online. Gillespie (2010) highlights that arbitrary content moderation choices—be they accidental or purposeful—can sideline diverse sexual narratives, which in turn restricts the ability of marginalized groups to inform, educate, and advocate. In line with this, Burgess and Green (2018) discuss the propensity of platform algorithms to gravitate towards more dominant narratives, inadvertently promoting a limited view of sexuality.

Consequently, the digital realm risks becoming a monochromatic echo chamber, neglecting the rich spectrum of human sexuality and the myriad identities intertwined within it. Such a narrowing not only compromises essential discussions around sexuality but can also subdue pivotal dialogues surrounding sexual health, rights, and identities, causing them to either blend indistinctly into the broader landscape of sexual content or be misconstrued entirely. Langlois et al. (2019) stress the broad societal repercussions of this, especially for marginalized groups striving for visibility and understanding. As digital platforms increasingly influence socio-cultural dialogues, flawed content governance mechanisms and moderation policies or interpretations might inadvertently perpetuate societal biases. Failing to discern the intricacies of sexual content, as this dissertation posits, can lead platforms to entrench harmful stereotypes or stigmas unintentionally. This challenge of discernment perpetuates a feedback loop: skewed platform policies influence public perception, which in turn informs future policies, consistently marginalizing nuanced expressions of sexuality (Gillespie, 2018).

1.4. TikTok: An Empirical Field of Study

TikTok, developed by the Beijing-based tech company *ByteDance*, launched in 2016 and quickly ascended to become a global phenomenon. As a social media platform, TikTok embodies the most recent evolution of the platform economy, capitalizing on the power of short-form video content sharing and user-generated creativity. Unlike traditional social media platforms that began with text and photo-sharing

capabilities, TikTok's core social exchange lies in its affordances for audio-visual expression. The app also distinguishes itself through a unique and algorithm-driven content feed, offering highly advanced personalized content recommendations that resonate with users, a feature that has been instrumental in its rapid growth and user engagement. Historically, its ascent can be attributed to ByteDance's acquisition of the lip-syncing app, Musical.ly, in 2017. This strategic move allowed TikTok to merge with Musical.ly and expand its user base, especially in the U.S., positioning it as a formidable competitor to established social media giants and making it an influential player in the digital platform landscape.

In recent years, TikTok has distinguished itself as a thriving cultural hub, captivating a global audience with its dynamic platform for creating, disseminating, and interacting with short video content. The platform has rapidly cemented its position as a premier social media platform, attracting an impressive 1.8 billion monthly active users across 154 countries. With a staggering four billion downloads from global app stores since its inception in September 2016, and a brand value that has rocketed to an estimated $66 billion in 2023, placing it among the most valuable brands in the world (Iqbal, 2023; Statistica, 2023), the ascendancy of TikTok, backed by its corporate entity ByteDance, has morphed the app into a global cultural phenomenon within a few short years. This meteoric rise can be partially attributed to its unique algorithmic curation, manifested through the TikTok 'For You Page' (FYP) feed, which caters to individual preferences, fostering a sense of personalized discovery and rewarding content creators with heightened visibility (Zhang, 2020). Furthermore, TikTok's innovative features and affordances, such as "Duet" and "Stitch," have revolutionized content production and remixing, paving the way for novel forms of collaboration, co-creation, and cultural exchange across the platform (Abidin, 2021).

TikTok's communicative features are distinct in their fusion of audio-visual content, collaborative and remixing affordances, time constraints, and interactive elements. The app's 15-second to 3-minute video format pushes users toward concise yet expressive communication, leading to an emphasis on visual storytelling and performative creativity. The platform's extensive library of sounds, inclusive of music snippets and voiceovers, allows users to harness popular audio to produce or reproduce content,

fostering trends and challenges that can go viral overnight. Furthermore, TikTok's unique technical features, specifically "duets" and "stitches," enable users to directly respond to or collaborate with other users' content, creating a cascade of interconnected videos and dialogues. This interactivity encourages the formation of niche communities, as users cluster around shared interests, hobbies, advocacies, and even humour. From dance challenges to educational tidbits, the varied content genres on TikTok have given rise to a sprawling ecosystem of communities, each with its own culture, influencers, and norms, making the platform a vibrant mosaic of global digital subcultures.

While various social media platforms have their signature features and user cultures, TikTok's distinguishing mark lies in its unparalleled algorithmic precision and emphasis on content discovery. Unlike platforms like Facebook or Instagram, where users predominantly see content from accounts they follow, TikTok's FYP prioritizes encounters with new content and content creators. This means that even lesser-known creators have the potential for their videos to achieve virality without a substantial pre-existing follower base. This democratization of virality is fundamentally different from the follow-feed model of other platforms. Moreover, TikTok's algorithm seems acutely attuned to individual user preferences, ensuring a highly personalized content stream. This focus on discovery, combined with its unique communicative features, allows TikTok to foster a diverse range of voices and talents, making it a cauldron of creativity and a distinct player in the social media landscape.

Since its 2016 inception, TikTok and its influence within the global digital ecosystem has seen considerable scholarly attention across diverse disciplines (Zheng et al., 2021). Though the platform is relatively still in its infancy, the rapid expansion of research into the platform has led to the establishment of dedicated research initiatives like the *TikTok Cultures Research Network* in 2020. This network, alongside others such as the *Global TikTok Researchers Network* and the *TikTok Data Lab*, has pooled researchers of varied backgrounds to dig into TikTok's impact on youth culture, political expression, and more. A surge in TikTok-centred symposia and academic conferences further signifies the platform's critical position in current academic discourse.

Within this burgeoning academic domain, scholars investigate diverse topics: the platform's ascendancy in the social media milieu (Kaye et al., 2021); the development of theoretical frames situating TikTok in platform studies (Zhang, 2020; Zheng et al., 2021); methodological challenges in studying TikTok (Schellewald, 2021); and governance-related issues (Gray, 2021; De Leyn et al., 2021). Additionally, investigations into TikTok's algorithms (Bandy & Diakopoulos, 2020; Bhandari & Bimo, 2022), the performance of identity (Darvin, 2022), community dynamics (Avdeeff, 2021; Zheng & Abidin, 2021), identity and visibility issues (Mackenzie & Nicholas, 2020; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021), and creator culture dynamics (Kaye, 2020; Abidin, 2021) further enrich our understanding of the platform. Empirical studies complement these theoretical explorations of the platform. Researchers probe TikTok's role in facilitating participatory culture (Baffone, 2022), shaping cultural identities and online interaction patterns through short-form video content (Kaye et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2022), influencing the global digital economy (Jia & Ruan, 2020; Highhouse, 2022), and affecting user daily experiences (Simpson & Semann, 2021; Yang, 2022).

Furthermore, the convergence of TikTok with political communication and activism has witnessed scholarly focus. Investigations into TikTok's potential as a political discourse facilitator, its civic engagement role, and its capacity for social mobilization have surfaced (Herrman, 2020; Medina Serrano et al., 2020). In this context, Keller et al. (2021) argue for examining TikTok's pivotal role in political messaging and debate dynamics. Serrano, Papakyriakopoulos, and Hegelich (2020) offer an evaluation of TikTok's political communication, emphasizing its interactive nature compared to other platforms. These insights, and many others, underscore TikTok's emerging significance in shaping political landscapes (Vijay & Gekker, 2021; Cervi & Marin-Llado, 2022).

Scholarly research on the subject also highlights the complex interaction of political, economic, and cultural elements within the context of TikTok. Brennan's (2021) analysis offers a panoramic view of TikTok's corporate tech infrastructure and data tactics, demystifying ByteDance's meteoric rise and operational paradigm. Concurrently, Zhang's 2020 inquiry into TikTok's Chinese forays delineates its diversification into realms like e-commerce and state-affiliated campaigns, showcasing a strategic

synchronization with governmental agendas. Also from an economic lens, TikTok's business model, monetization strategies, and ByteDance's governance have drawn academic attention (Hanifa & Kurniawan, 2022; Gagliardi, 2022; Jaipong, 2023). Jia and Liang (2020) offer a holistic view of TikTok's global trajectory, examining globalization tactics, data governance, content policies, and geopolitical dimensions. This intricate relationship between business strategy and regional governance further complements studies from a media and cultural angle. Here, emphasis is placed on TikTok's influence on digital labour, content creation cultures, and the evolving dynamics of media practices and cultural expressions (Baffone, 2022; Kaur-Gill, 2023; Wang & Feng, 2022). The precarious nature of digital work on TikTok, with its algorithmic focus on virality over worker rights, also becomes a critical concern (Karizat et al., 2021).

Within academic discourse, TikTok's evolution is frequently contextualized through its intricate interplay of political, economic, and cultural dimensions. A salient strand of this research underscores TikTok's potential to reshape established media ecosystems and cultural realms (Baffone, 2021, 2022, 2023; Collie & Wilson-Barnao, 2020). Instead of mirroring Silicon Valley behemoths, TikTok is often conceptualized as a disruptive force, forging innovative pathways for content creation and distribution (Cunningham & Craig, 2017; 2019). Such a paradigm shift poses challenges to entrenched media arbiters, from Hollywood moguls to on-demand streaming powerhouses, effectively decentralizing the locus of cultural production. Coined as "social media entertainment," platforms like TikTok intertwine the dynamic interactivity of social media with the receptive engagement typical of traditional media (Zheng et al., 2021; Cunningham & Craig, 2017). This confluence underscores TikTok's transformative role in redefining media creation, distribution, and consumption while simultaneously fostering cultural diversity and fostering community participation.

TikTok's emerging prominence within the domains of political discourse and activism has been a focal point in contemporary academic discourse. Grassroots initiatives, capitalizing on the platform's idiosyncratic affordances, have weaponized its reach for amplifying messages, facilitating discourse, and catalyzing mobilization (Vijay & Gekker, 2021; Cervi & Marin-Llado, 2022; Collie & Wilson-Barnao,

2020). Crucial to this engagement are TikTok's distinctive features—chiefly its algorithmically-driven recommendation system and the inherently viral nature of its short-form video format. These features, in conjunction, are redefining the contours of political engagement, giving rise to a new paradigm of political communication underpinned by multi-directional interactions and rapid information diffusion (Serrano et al., 2020). Beyond mere communication, the ripple effects of TikTok's influence are palpable in the realm of political socialization. There's an emerging consensus within scholarship that the platform holds substantive sway over political enculturation and identity formation, particularly for younger generations (De Leyn et al., 2021; Haslem, 2022). Detailed examinations suggest that interactions on TikTok can significantly shape and recalibrate political orientations, value systems, and affiliations, thus underscoring its transformative potential in the larger political landscape.

The existing research offers rich insights into user-dynamics on TikTok. These studies encompass user profiles, inclinations, content affinities, autonomy, and content creation (Nazarov & Nazarov, 2021; Scherr & Wang, 2021; Kanthawala et al., 2022). This user-centric research trajectory also documents motivations and behavioural patterns, reinforcing the pivotal role of users in sculpting cultural movements, online advocacy, and innovative expression (Scherr & Wang, 2021). Particularly in the realm of socio-technical studies, TikTok presents a complex tapestry that showcases an interplay between its technical affordances and user-driven practices. Scholarly inquiries in this domain often pivot on deciphering the nexus between the platform’s inherent features and the multi-modal forms of expression they engender, encompassing diverse facets from artistic articulations to community interactions(D'Emilio, 1998; Xu et al., 2019; Kennedy, 2020). These engagements amplify emergent trends, catalyze activism, and nurture the proliferation of subcultures, underscoring TikTok’s role as a dynamic cultural stage akin to a modern amphitheater.

Diving deeper, works like those of Abidin pierce through the veneer of TikTok’s surface dynamics to unearth the symbiotic relationship between its technical mechanics and the evolving paradigm of internet celebrity. Central here is the ethos of attention economies that often drive creatorship, where the intricate competition of influencers vying for visibility unravels, shedding light on

the changing dynamics of digital fame and public gaze (Abidin, 2021; Abidin et al., 2021). As TikTok contributes to recalibrating the metrics of digital fame, it challenges and transforms our age-old conceptions of public and private spaces. Now, with the omnipresent digital lens, what was once considered intimate and personal readily transposes into the realm of the public, with users often willingly surrendering their privacy in exchange for a moment of viral fame.

Yet, it is crucial to recognize that TikTok's influence isn't limited to shaping celebrity dynamics. The platform's algorithmic foundation exerts a transformative impact on users' sense of self and identity. This emerging discourse points to a significant metamorphosis in how individuals craft and project their self-image, often erasing the demarcations between what was once deemed private and what is public (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Cheney-Lippold, 2017). Within this context, the works of Cheney-Lippold and Bhandari & Bimo articulate the platform's inclination towards "algorithmized self-making," where users adapt their digital personas, guided by the algorithm's concealed criteria for visibility. This constant negotiation for validation—measured in likes, shares, and comments—doesn't remain confined to the digital realm. It permeates real-world behaviors, amplifying the performative aspect of identity, accentuating the emotional stakes of being seen, and molding the nuances of daily experiences.

However, the pervasive influence of the algorithm carries a double edge. While it undeniably orchestrates a unique digital landscape, there are growing apprehensions about its unintended consequences. One of the most pressing concerns is its potential to inadvertently silence the voices of marginalized communities or to magnify contentious, even harmful, content. Such unintended biases in algorithmic design and function can result in a distorted representation, potentially drowning out crucial narratives or privileging dominant ones, a phenomenon astutely noted by Kang & Lou (2022). Kanthawala et al. research into this dynamic, revealing the proactive tactics users adopt to maneuver through TikTok's algorithmic maze. Their findings illuminate not just a reactive strategy, but an active bid by users to assert agency, ensuring their content doesn't recede into digital oblivion.

Complementing this discussion, Simpson and Semann's work provides a critical lens on the LGBTQ+ community's engagement with TikTok. Their research underscores the intricate, and often

transformative, effects of algorithmic mediation on the community's digital interactions, reflecting the broader theme of users continually adapting to, resisting, and redefining the boundaries set by platform algorithms. By constantly reshaping and adapting to the whims of algorithmic popularity and audience approval, individuals are prompted to revaluate and sometimes reconstruct their authentic selves in pursuit of digital acceptance or to fit within the confines of the platform's infrastructure. This repeated negotiation and adaptation permeates into users' offline realities, subtly influencing their self-perception, self-worth, and even their day-to-day choices and behaviors. Herein lies an essential dimension of the present study: the evolving experiences and understandings of sexual content creators and their relationship with platform politics and governance.

Sexual content creators on TikTok, like on many other platforms, occupy a precarious position. While the platform celebrates user-generated content and champions diverse voices, its content moderation policies, and algorithmic biases– both key mechanisms of platform governance–have occasionally appeared restrictive towards content that overtly or subtly navigates themes of sexuality (Lorenzo-Dus & Blitvich, 2020). Sexual content creators, who often engage in work that ranges from advocating for sex positivity to discussing sexual health or engaging in forms of digital eroticism, find themselves entangled in a complex web of platform power and politics.

These creators' experiences provide a compelling case study in platform governance. TikTok's algorithm, with its mysterious underpinnings, sometimes sidelines or shadow bans these creators, making their content less discoverable and, by extension, limiting their reach and impact (Wang & Markham, 2020). Many report ambiguous content flagging or takedowns, reflecting an uneasy tension between the platform's aspirations for user diversity and its more conservative content guidelines (Duffy & Hund, 2019). TikTok's governance, in this sense, often oscillates between embracing the rich tapestry of content varieties and cautiously navigating the potential pitfalls of controversial content. Moreover, the platform's global nature complicates this dynamic, as it must grapple with varying cultural norms, legal restrictions, and societal expectations related to sexual content across different regions (De Leyn et al., 2021).

While some TikTok creators adapt to the changing tides of politics and governance on TikTok, by self-censoring or employing coded language, others rally their communities, raising awareness about perceived algorithmic biases and advocating for more transparent content moderation policies. These actions signify an active renegotiation of platform power dynamics, where content creators are not merely passive recipients of platform policies but active stakeholders influencing its governance (Gillespie, 2018). In essence, the experiences of sexual content creators on TikTok encapsulate the platform's broader challenges in balancing user autonomy with governance. Their narratives, intertwined with issues of platform politics, algorithmic biases, and content moderation, exemplify the evolving nature of digital spaces and the continuous negotiation between user agency and platform authority. The experiences and testimonies of these creators are invaluable in understanding platform politics and governance on TikTok. On one hand, their content symbolizes resistance, reclaiming narratives, and carving spaces for marginalized voices. On the other, their interactions with the platform's governance mechanisms underscore the challenges of regulating content in an ever-evolving digital landscape. Their endeavors, coupled with scholarly research, will present a vivid tableau of TikTok's political economy, where content, community, and commerce converge and collide.

Despite the existing exploration of TikTok's multifaceted dimensions, a conspicuous gap remains in the literature in addressing the politics and governance of sexual content and its implications on the platform. This void can be attributed to a combination of factors: firstly, a societal reticence in approaching topics of sexuality openly, and secondly, the rapidly evolving nature of TikTok's algorithm and community guidelines that make sustained academic scrutiny challenging. Moreover, as platforms like TikTok become primary sources of information and socialization for younger generations, there's a prevailing hesitancy to critically engage with how these platforms handle or, at times, mishandle sensitive subjects like sexuality. Addressing this gap is imperative, not only for understanding TikTok's governance dynamics but also for exploring the implications on content creators, particularly those who explore themes of sexuality. Furthermore, such an investigation is crucial for marginalized communities, who often find their voices and experiences subjected to disproportionate censorship or misrepresentation.

Lastly, as the digital landscape continues to influence societal perceptions and norms, understanding how sexuality is mediated on platforms like TikTok provides insights into the broader dialogues surrounding sexuality, freedom of expression, and digital citizenship in the 21st century.

In conclusion, TikTok, beyond its facade as a mere social media entertainment platform, provides an invaluable empirical case for studying the intricacies of power and agency in the realm of digital platform politics and governance. The way creators navigate the app's algorithmic directives, community guidelines, and the platform's ever-evolving trends, policies, and features offers a rich tapestry of interactions that can shed light on the nuanced relationship between individual agency and platform-imposed constraints and influences. The performances and productions of these creators are not merely artistic expressions, but also acts of negotiation with the underlying power dynamics that define the platform. By analyzing these interactions, one can discern how TikTok's governance structures both enable and limit the creative agency, thereby offering insights into the broader digital ecosystem's balance of power and its implications for user autonomy and identity.

1.5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this dissertation intends to contribute to academic discussions surrounding digital platforms, their politics, and governance, particularly within the domains of platformization and the deplatformization of sexual information and communication. By situating TikTok at the forefront of this exploration, the study aims to shed light on the intricate balance of power, control, and agency that manifests within the platform. Beyond simply evaluating TikTok's policies and practices, this dissertation intends to understand the deeper cultural, societal, and political underpinnings that drive such platform decisions and the experiences, understandings, and influences of those who it affects. In doing so, the research aspires to contribute to bridging the existing gaps in literature, offering nuanced perspectives on the ways in which users and digital platforms negotiate, regulate, and sometimes suppress topics of sexuality, while also highlighting the consequences and implications of these dynamics for the vast community of users, creators, and audiences alike.

The findings and theoretical framework developed in this dissertation to support the research hinges on two pivotal concepts: "sexual context collapse" and the "sexual content spectrum." These notions not only probe into the vast spectrum of sexual expressions, motivations, and practices but also provide a lens through which the convergence of multiple sexual contexts in a singular digital environment can be understood. The framework importantly emphasizes the rich tapestry of motivations behind sexual content on TikTok, transcending the simple goal of evoking desire and illuminating its manifold purposes. Drawing from foundational theories of embodied performances, governmentality, and context collapse, this perspective offers a renewed vantage point from which to interpret the complexities of sexual content in the digital domain. Building on this, the dissertation introduces a nuanced typology for conceptualizing sexual content. This typology is not restricted by age-old binaries; instead, it adopts a more encompassing spectrum approach, spanning from non-erotic to erotic content. It acknowledges the vast objectives underpinning this content, whether for advocacy, education, entertainment, or personal expression. This typology aids in resolving the challenges of context collapse by offering a more granular classification of sexual content, thereby facilitating clearer distinctions, and understanding within the broad umbrella of sexuality on digital platforms.

The introduction of this typology serves as an instrumental tool for unpacking the research question, specifically regarding how digital content creators engaged in the production of digital sexual content navigate the intricate web of platform governance on TikTok. At its core, the typology offers a structured, multi-layered framework that allows for the dissection of sexual content into varied categories, spanning from non-erotic to erotic, with each category having its distinct motivations, be it advocacy, education, entertainment, or personal expression. By doing so, it provides a roadmap for understanding the specific challenges, constraints, and freedoms faced by creators within each category. For instance, content that leans towards the advocacy or educational side of the spectrum may confront different forms of platform regulations compared to content that is purely for entertainment. As researchers employ this typology, they can more adeptly discern how creators, based on the nature and intent of their content, interpret platform rules, adapt to potential algorithmic biases, and strategize to either comply with or

challenge platform norms. Furthermore, by studying the lived experiences of these creators through the lens of the typology, researchers can illuminate the symbiotic relationship between individual agency and platform architecture. As creators mold their content to fit within the digital confines of TikTok, or conversely, push its boundaries, they not only react to but also influence platform governance, setting precedents, and indirectly shaping the platform's politics. Thus, the typology does more than classify content; it elucidates the dance between creator intent, platform constraints, and the ever-evolving dynamics of digital sexual expression, directly responding to the research question's dual focus on individual strategies and broader platform governance.

To encapsulate, this study analyzes TikTok on an empirical level, to assess the intricate interplay between content creation and platform politics and governance. The experiences, challenges, and strategies of sexual content creators on TikTok's expansive landscape take center stage in this analysis, with the objective of enhancing the current understanding of the platform’s politics and their governance in this context, while emphasizing the paradoxes inherent in platformization and deplatformization. To formulate this analysis, an interdisciplinary multi-method approach is adopted, seamlessly blending media and cultural studies with political science and several qualitative research methods. This interdisciplinary, multi-method lens enables an exploration of the socio-technical implications of the digital platform’s governance, particularly within the realms of human sexuality and platform politics.

Using this methodology, the complex relationship between platform politics, governance, and the potential marginalization of specific cultures, identities, and groups will come to light; additionally. highlighting the intricate power dynamics and political dimensions interwoven with digital content creation and moderation. The dissertation also considers the notions of visibility as power and affective politics in agency around TikTok performances, to consider it in the larger discourse surrounding digital platform governance. In essence, this dissertation strives to illuminate the convergence of individual agency, platform structures, and political dynamics in shaping the landscape of sexual content creation on TikTok.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Integrating insights from various academic disciplines, Chapter 2 establishes a robust informational foundation for understanding the intricate interplay between digital platforms, content creation, power dynamics, governance mechanisms, and the socio-cultural dynamics of user agency in online sexual expression. Employing a multidisciplinary lens, the literature review endeavors to elucidate the complex relationships by investigating the intersections of digital platforms, power structures, and the cultural contexts surrounding sexual content. First, the review probes into the realm of platform studies, highlighting the transformative role digital platforms play in shaping contemporary media landscapes and the governance structures they entail. This exploration underscores key concepts such as platformization, platform politics, and the symbiotic roles of both platforms and users within the digital sphere. A critical focus is placed on content governance, deplatforming practices, and the intricate mechanisms of platform moderation. Within this context, the concepts of "deplatforming" and "deplatformization" are meticulously dissected in relation to visibility politics and the affective dimensions inherent in these processes. This analysis sets the stage for discussions on digital body politics, creators' performances, and the deplatformization of sexual content, offering insights into the multifaceted nature of digital sexual expression and its intersection with power dynamics and platform governance.

2.1. Platforms, Platformization, and Platform Studies

Platforms manifest today as diverse digital realms, from social media platforms like *Facebook, Instagram,* and *Twitter,* which mediate interpersonal communications and information dissemination, to e-commerce platforms like *Amazon* and *Alibaba,* which streamline the buying and selling of goods. There are also platforms like TikTok and *YouTube,* a hybrid of media sharing, entertainment, and social interaction, and *Airbnb,* which connects homeowners with travelers, redefining traditional hospitality sectors. Digital platforms, despite their diverse primary functionalities, converge on a shared architecture: they establish technical and organizational infrastructures that facilitate myriad users—ranging from individuals to businesses and other entities—to interact, transact, and generate value (van Dijck et al.,

2018). Beyond mere tools, they act as influential actors and intermediaries in contemporary society. Their pervasive presence underscores their profound capacity to transform not only commercial landscapes but also to redefine social engagements, cultural narratives, and political discourses.

Diverse scholars within the realm of platform studies approach the term "platform" from an array of perspectives, thereby shaping a complex, multifaceted conceptual landscape in academic scholarship. Historically, platforms were initially understood predominantly in technological terms, perceived as neutral digital architectures designed to support software applications or facilitate online interactions. Jean Burgess and Joshua Green (2009) describe this early understanding as platforms being akin to "digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact." This rudimentary perspective emphasized the functional aspect of platforms, positioning them as innocuous intermediaries that simply provided a space for users to generate and share content. Gillespie (2010), in his early writings, often pointed out the popular notion of platforms as "empty stages" ready to be populated by user activity. The simplicity of this viewpoint is reflected in early scholarly works that approached platforms as merely technical facilitators, devoid of any inherent agenda or power dynamics. This perspective, however, has evolved considerably as scholars began to research deeper into the multifaceted nature of platforms, recognizing them not just as tools but as influential actors in the digital sphere with far-reaching socio-political implications.

In subsequent contributions, the literature, much like Gillespie’s (2018), fundamentally shifted the conceptual narrative of ‘the platform’, advancing it from being viewed as a simplistic technological structure to a complex socio-technical agent. Gillespie’s later work, for instance, gives agency to the platform as an intermediary, positing that platforms do not merely use the term "platform" as a descriptive identifier; instead, they strategically adopt this terminology to navigate and assert their roles within broader dialogues encompassing technology, culture, and regulation. Far from being neutral facilitators of user-generated content, platforms, in Gillespie's view, actively and selectively exercise nuanced control over the information flow, acting as gatekeepers of key information. In doing so, they play a pivotal role

as intermediaries in knowledge production, shaping public discourse, and influencing societal perceptions (Lobato, 2016).

Gillespie's critical reframing of platforms precipitated a ripple effect throughout the literature. Scholars began interrogating the taken-for-granted assumptions around platforms, inspiring a more critical, multi-dimensional analysis. His emphasis on platform politics debunked long-held views of platforms as inherently open, egalitarian spaces, instead drawing attention to the controversial aspects of their operations. This newfound perspective gave rise to vigorous discussions around data exploitation, content moderation, and the often-hidden power dynamics at play. As a result, subsequent research started to explore into the sociocultural ramifications of platforms, shedding light on their political agency, and raising questions about their roles as both technological infrastructures and social actors. The academic discourse became richer, more varied, and increasingly critical, as scholars built upon Gillespie's foundational ideas to further explore the intersection of platforms with society, politics, and economics.

In the scholarly trajectory defining the concept of platforms, another important contribution was the even earlier entry of Burgess and Green (2009) into the discourse. Their study on the video-sharing platform YouTube not only reinforced but also expanded the emerging view of platforms as non-neutral entities, blending technology with cultural influences. In other words, their cultural analysis in platform studies, has underscored the importance of "the platformization of cultural production." Through their analysis, they argue platforms have democratized cultural production (Williams, 1980; 1974), allowing individuals from diverse backgrounds to participate in content creation, sharing, and distribution processes previously monopolized by traditional cultural industry gatekeepers. This decentralization of cultural production via platforms has challenged the hegemony of established cultural institutions and facilitated greater inclusivity and diversity in the creation and circulation of cultural content. The platforms' affordances and accessibility have empowered individuals to transition from passive consumers to active cultural producers and distributors. This shift has reshaped conventional power dynamics and opened up fresh pathways for cultural expression and exchange.

By highlighting the intricate dynamics of monetizing user-generated content while simultaneously nurturing a sense of user agency and empowerment, they expose the multifaceted challenges platforms confront–what Gillespie (2010) later called “the politics of platforms.” Their meticulous analysis of content moderation — a seemingly mundane yet deeply consequential practice — provides scholars with invaluable insights into the tensions, trade-offs, and moral quandaries that characterize platform governance. Building on this intellectual foundation laid by both Gillespie and Burgess and Green, van Dijck (2013) offers an even more expansive reconceptualization. He perceives platforms not as isolated entities but as interwoven parts of a sprawling "platform ecosystem". Van Dijck's analysis is all-encompassing: she identifies a diverse cohort of stakeholders — ranging from everyday users and developers to advertisers and the often-enigmatic platform proprietors. Each of these actors, according to van Dijck, does not merely exist within the platform ecosystem; they actively mould its ethos, determining its norms, values, and practices. Far from being passive infrastructures, platforms, in her assessment, emerge as vigorous mediators of socio-cultural processes. They are imbued with a certain "logic" — a set of principles, protocols, and practices — which not only influence but in numerous ways dictate user behaviours and societal norms. Van Dijck’s illuminating perspective transforms our understanding of platforms. By presenting them as dynamic socio-cultural juggernauts operating within an intricate web of techno-social relationships, her work refines and enriches the academic narrative, igniting fresh discussions on platform governance, data sovereignty, and the profound cultural reverberations of our algorithm-driven digital epoch.

Bratton’s (2016) seminal work, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*, represents another pivotal contribution in academic discussion on the politics of platforms in platform studies. Diverging from prior conceptualizations, Bratton introduces the transformative idea of the "platform stack." Rather than viewing platforms as singular monolithic structures, Bratton envisions them as intricate, multi-layered constellations comprising both material and immaterial phenomena. In this architectural model, "the platform" is no longer just an abstract concept but a tangible assemblage of diverse components: software, hardware, protocols, interfaces, and infrastructures, all coalescing to enable dynamic operations

within a digital ecosystem. Bratton's layered architecture demystifies platforms by teasing apart the visible components—those that users interact with directly—from the often obscure, underlying technical infrastructures. He meticulously maps out six distinct yet interconnected layers: "Earth", "Cloud", "City", "Address", "Interface", and "User". Each layer, as Bratton posits, adheres to its unique logic and functionality, but it is their synergistic interaction that gives birth to our digital realities.

What makes Bratton's approach so invaluable to modern platform studies is the nuanced granularity it offers. He transcends a superficial understanding to shed light on the delicate interplays among technical, infrastructural, and human elements within platforms. This perspective allows for a deeper interrogation of platforms' systemic natures, emphasizing their roles as socio-technical matrices that both shape and are shaped by myriad social, cultural, and economic processes. Through his lens, platforms emerge not as mere digital tools but as crucial nodes in a complex web of hierarchical and networked relationships, reflecting and influencing broader socio-political and cultural currents. Consequently, Bratton's insights join the pantheon of critical voices in platform studies, further enriching our comprehension of the intricate tapestry that is "the platform".

As the exploration of "the platform" continues to advance in academic discourse, the concept itself remains fascinatingly diverse and multifaceted, eliciting a spectrum of interpretations that shed light on its complex dimensions. Platforms are more than just neutral digital environments or technological interfaces; they are pivotal actors in the vast digital realm. Whether perceived as intermediaries or gatekeepers that regulate the flow of information (Gillespie, 2018), democratic spaces fostering participatory culture (van Dijck, 2019), or potent mediators of social and cultural production (Williams, 1980), the conceptualization of platforms is constantly evolving.

Platforms, as Gillespie (2010, 2018) suggests, are intricate socio-technical systems, controlling and shaping the production of knowledge and public discourse. Further, as elucidated by Burgess and Green (2009), platforms can also be catalysts for creativity, collaboration, and civic participation, democratizing the creation and distribution of content while navigating the delicate balance between commercial and user interests. Van Dijck (2013) takes this understanding a step further, positioning

platforms as active components within a broader "platform ecosystem," populated by various stakeholders each wielding influence over platform norms and practices. Last, Bratton's (2016) innovative "platform stack" concept presents platforms as multi-layered assemblages of technical, infrastructural, and human elements, illuminating their role as critical nodes within our socio-political, cultural, and economic networks. This eclectic array of perspectives underscores the profound complexity inherent in the platform concept, paving the way for continued scholarly exploration and debate in the years to come.

The evolution of platforms, within academic scrutiny, is deeply rooted in the transformative epoch of the early 2000s. The digital landscape of 'Web 1.0' was typified by static web architectures, which predominantly acted as information repositories with limited user agency. The content was primarily a unidirectional flow from webmasters to passive consumers. However, with the inception of 'Web 2.0', scholars observed a critical paradigmatic shift. This new iteration foregrounded the importance of interactivity, user-centricity, and collaborative modalities. Such an environment nurtured the emergence of platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok, which transcended traditional digital boundaries to create interactive ecosystems. Crucially, the 'Web 2.0' era saw the rise of social networks, wherein the user was not merely a consumer but an active participant, reshaping content, connections, and digital communities (van Dijck, 2019, 2018; Kenney & Zysman, 2016). These platforms epitomized the move from mere digital presence to active digital participation, reshaping the very epistemology of online interactions.

Technological innovations played an indispensable role in driving this transformation of the internet landscape. Improved internet networks and cable infrastructures facilitated faster data transfer and increased bandwidth, allowing for real-time interactions and the streaming of multimedia content without significant latency. This advancement dovetailed with the broader accessibility of the internet across the globe, democratizing digital access. Furthermore, smartphones and tablets introduced a new dimension of ubiquity and immediacy to internet usage. These portable devices, with their intuitive interfaces and powerful processing capabilities, enabled users to engage with digital platforms on the move, breaking the spatial tether of desktop computing. The combination of these technological

innovations not only expanded the user base but also enriched the depth and breadth of interactions on digital platforms, underscoring the intricacy and dynamism of the 'Web 2.0' era.

Concurrent with these technological advancements, the academic landscape recalibrated its focus, recognizing the profound potential and implications of emerging platforms. Scholars across a spectrum of disciplines - encompassing media studies, sociology, economics, and beyond - embarked on nuanced inquiries into the complex roles and ramifications of these digital intermediaries. Initial scholarly engagements, characterized by a buoyant optimism about the platforms' democratic prospects, gradually matured into more discerning critiques. This shift in academic discourse mirrored the evolving understanding of these platforms: from mere tools of digital engagement to potent entities wielding considerable socio-cultural and economic influence. As their ubiquity and centrality intensified, academic conversations pivoted, emphasizing not just the operational facets of platforms but their profound capacity to sculpt public discourse, modulate user behaviour, and recalibrate the very dynamics of global political and economic structures.

One of the first to recognize this shift in web architecture and the social transformation stemming from it, Helmond's (2015) introduction of the term 'platformization' was pivotal in this evolving discourse. Platformization, as she proposed, captured the metamorphosis of the internet. What was once a vast space of independent websites had been increasingly dominated by a select few platforms that exerted considerable influence over content, data, and user interactions. This highlighted a fundamental shift: the internet was no longer just a tool or a space but had become an ecosystem, with platforms at its core, dictating its rules and shaping its evolution. Helmond also notably argues that platformization has led to a profound shift not only in the technical structure of the web but also in its governance and cultural logics. It brings about the entanglement of traditional web practices with the affordances, operations, and economic models of platforms. This convergence resulted in a transformed digital environment, where the mechanisms of visibility, circulation, and value creation are increasingly dictated by platform logics. Thus, platformization goes beyond the technical layer of the internet, altering the socio-cultural and economic dynamics of digital spaces. Helmond’s viewpoint encourages us to contemplate the ever-

changing and interactive nature of interactions between platforms and users, as well as the broader online ecosystem. As argued by Helmond (2015), platformization is a continuous and dynamic process in which platforms consistently integrate themselves into established web practices and environments, shaping them to conform to their functional logic and data-oriented business models.

Since Helmond's pioneering work introduced the concept of platformization within platform studies, it has swiftly risen as a pivotal theoretical framework, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of platforms and their pervasive influence. Originating within the confines of Media, Culture, and Communication Studies, platform studies has seen an expansive interdisciplinary trajectory, embracing insights from diverse academic realms. This burgeoning interest underscores the recognition of platforms not merely as technological or governance infrastructures, but as catalysts spurring profound socio-cultural shifts. The field's broadening purview has integrated perspectives from disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and urban studies. This inclusivity signifies a growing acknowledgment of platforms as the lifeblood of contemporary societal processes and structures, both in virtual and tangible realms. Furthermore, the phenomenon of platformization—understood as the manner in which digital platforms permeate, mould, and govern various societal sectors—has become instrumental in reorienting academic disciplines. It compels them to assess the nuances of digitization in varied fields, investigating how platforms influence the creation, dissemination, and consumption of information and value.

In the ever-evolving dialogue of platform and platformization studies, the investigation of digital platforms hinges on sound theoretical underpinnings that delineate their role, impact, and ramifications in our current social milieu. Notably, two influential frameworks have carved out a distinct relevance in this sphere - Manuel Castells' concept of the "Network Society," and Frank Webster's depiction of the "Information Society". These conceptual lenses offer critical insights into the structural and informational intricacies of digital platforms. Castells' theory encapsulates the complex meshwork of technological and social networks within which platforms operate, underlining their dynamic and integrative character. In juxtaposition, Webster's perspective stresses the supreme importance of information in our contemporary socio-economic terrain, where platforms assume dual roles as vast repositories and efficient conduits of

this valuable resource. Collectively, these conceptual frameworks furnish a comprehensive understanding, underscoring the dual functionality of platforms as pivotal nodes in a globally networked society and indispensable agents in an information-driven economy.

The "network society," as conceptualized by Castells (1996), signifies a transformative departure from traditional understandings of socio-technical systems, especially pertinent in our rapidly digitizing world. Castells' exploration is not just an acknowledgment of the digital age; it offers a profound sociological reflection on the emergent structures of contemporary society. In the network society, information and communication technologies (ICTs) don't merely function as instrumental utilities—they alter the matrix of societal organization, knitting together diverse social actors and institutions in intricate, interdependent networks. Unlike the deterministic and static hierarchies that characterized earlier societal models, these networks possess a fluidity and adaptability, responsive to the ebbs and flows of technological, societal, and economic tidal waves (Castells, 1996, 1997). While Castells was probing the nascent stages of this structural evolution in the late 20th century, his insights have gained renewed pertinence in today's era dominated by digital platforms. Such platforms, with their multifaceted connective infrastructures, epitomize the quintessence of the network society. They are more than mere spaces of interaction; they are dynamic arenas where information is curated, where myriad entities forge connections, and where traditional power hierarchies are incessantly renegotiated (Castells, 2001). Thus, platforms emerge not merely as passive recipients of networked dynamics but as active agents, propelling both technological and socio-cultural metamorphoses.

On a parallel track, the "information society" theory, championed by scholars like Webster (2006, 2014), elevates information to the fulcrum around which modern societies operate. In Webster's vision, the information society is one where the lifecycle of information—from its generation to its dissemination, to its consumption—commands unparalleled centrality in all aspects of society. He contends that, in such a society, information transforms from mere abstract data into tangible assets that propel socio-economic advancement (Webster, 2006). Platforms, in this paradigm, are not mere facilitators or neutral marketplaces. They emerge as the very bedrock upon which this information-

anchored society is constructed. Their role is multifaceted—they mediate, they regulate, they curate, and often, they commodify information trajectories, constantly reshaping its inherent value and significance in the process (Webster, 2014). Through this analytical lens, digital platforms can be perceived as not only the progeny of the Information Society but also its potent catalysts. Their intricate algorithms, infrastructural designs, and policy frameworks hold the power to dictate what information is spotlighted, the modalities of its dissemination, and the socio-economic valuation attached to it (Binns et al., 2017). Platforms, thereby, transcend their operational utility, assuming a determinative influence in sculpting the contours of the digital economy, societal values, and the behavioural norms of the Information Society (Webster, 2006).

In distilling the contributions of these theoretical frameworks for understanding platformization, the 'network society' and 'information society' theories reveal the multifaceted, transformative role of platforms in contemporary society. The network society model delineated by Castells (1996, 1997, 2001) enlightens us on the foundational dynamics of digital platforms, positioning them as vital nodes in an interconnected social matrix. This framework fosters an understanding of platforms as critical mediators, facilitating diverse socio-economic and cultural transactions while subtly navigating the power structures and hierarchies within these networks. Concurrently, Webster's information society framework underscores the primacy of information as the driving force of socio-economic change in our digital age (Webster, 2006, 2014). It emphasizes platforms as vital gatekeepers in the information ecosystem, entrusted with curating, disseminating, and attributing value to information. Taken together, these theoretical frameworks contribute to a comprehensive understanding of platforms, intertwining technological infrastructures with socio-cultural processes. They guide the discourse on platform power and influence, questioning not only their operational logics but also their broader societal ramifications. These paradigms are pivotal as platforms increasingly become the central orchestrators of information flows and social connectivity.

Drawing on the foundational theoretical frameworks of platformization, platform studies have provided nuanced insights into the profound socio-cultural metamorphoses instigated by platforms. These

insights emphasize platforms' impacts on societal architectures, cultural norms, and economic mechanisms. Rather than simplifying platformization as a mere technological advance, these theories drive scholars to interpret it as an intricate interplay of socio-cultural and economic forces. This interpretation underscores the necessity of a multi-faceted analytical approach to truly grasp platformization's pervasive influence. Consequently, this analytical pivot illuminates' platforms as critical agents necessitating a comprehensive reassessment of socio-economic paradigms in the contemporary era. Within this context, the "platform economy" has become a central concept and topic of inquiry; as scholars have sought to understand the political, economic, and cultural implications of the rapid growth and proliferation of digital platforms (van Dijck et al., 2018; Srnicek, 2017; Kenny & Zysman, 2016). The examination of relationships between platform operators, intermediaries, users, content creators, and other agents has been critical, as these stakeholders navigate mechanisms of power and extract value through data-driven business models and users'-- often exploited–digital labour (Velkova & Kaun, 2021; Gerrard & Thornham, 2020; Dieter et al., 2019; Srniek, 2017; Fuchs, 2014, 2020; Langley & Leyshon, 2017; Fuchs & Fisher, 2015; Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013; Terranova, 2000).

In analyzing the politics and economics of digital platforms, platform studies have interrogated how platformization intersects with historical systems of commercial surveillance (Carmi, 2019; Lyon, 2017; Dubrofsky, 2011; Andrejevic, 2010), capitalism (Chandler & Fuchs, 2019; Faucher, 2018; Hesmondhalgh, 2015), marginalization (Cobbe, 2020), and competition (Srniek, 2017). In this context critical platformization scholars have addressed how the politics and economics of digital platforms are deeply intertwined with a historical system of commercial surveillance (Carmi, 2019; Lyon, 2017; Dubrofsky, 2011; Andrejevic, 2010), capitalist exploitation (Chandler & Fuchs 2019; Faucher, 2018; Hesmondhalgh, 2015), marginalization and exclusion (Cobbe, 2020), and competition (Srniek, 2017), and how this affects the structuring power of algorithms that orders and invisibly shapes individuals, public information, cultural knowledge, and personal communication (Bucher, 2018, 2017; Beer, 2016; Pasquale, 2015). Key debates within this discourse consider topics such as privacy, surveillance, shifting power dynamics, and regulatory challenges posed by novel digital entities that defy traditional

governance structures (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020; van Dijck et al., 2018; Mazzucato et al., 2020; Kenny & Zysman, 2016).

By examining platforms and platformization through these diverse epistemological lenses, scholars have contributed to a better understanding of both the transformative potential and the inherent challenges that accompany the expanding platform economy—a phenomenon that continues to redefine the digital world and its interplay with human agency. A salient example is provided by economist and sociologist Srnicek, who presents a persuasive argument on platforms' roles in recalibrating global economic configurations and labour relations (Srnicek, 2017). His seminal work, *Platform Capitalism*, posits platformization as a revolutionary epoch in capitalism, indicating a shift from conventional manufacturing or service-oriented paradigms towards an operational model predicated upon data extraction and control. According to Srnicek, the crux of platform value lies not merely in the services rendered but in their capacity to monopolize and derive utility from copious data gathered from user engagements. This perspective calls for an in-depth scrutiny of 'platform capitalism' as an ecosystem where data transforms into a paramount commodity, and platforms assume the role of primary data intermediaries.

Complementing and critiquing Srnicek's political economic theory, Shoshana Zuboff's work provides an analysis of platforms' economic models. Zuboff (2019) presents 'surveillance capitalism' as the business archetype of platforms, delineating a novel global market structure wherein user-generated personal data emerges as the principal commodity. She argues that platforms' data extraction, accumulation, and processing mechanisms have precipitated an unrivalled form of capital accumulation. Zuboff explains how pervasive surveillance by platforms not only facilitates user data extraction but also empowers them to expect and influence user behaviours. This intrusive ecosystem infringes upon user privacy and subtly manipulates behaviours, fostering a palpable power disequilibrium. Hence, surveillance capitalism signifies a novel paradigm in the nexus of capital and privacy, fashioning a scenario where platforms wield immense sway over individual lives and societal structures.

Other scholars, like Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018), argue that platforms are not merely neutral technical infrastructures or global political economic systems, but also embody cultural dimensions. They assert that platforms not only facilitate economic activities but also shape personal communication, dissemination practices, and cultural expressions. Recognizing this, they argue it becomes essential to understand platforms' dual functions: they provide the architecture for digital interactions while subtly steering these interactions with distinct cultures and ideologies. Through this lens, "platformization" emerges as a cultural process that reshapes communication, community engagement, and identity formation. Importantly, Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal suggest a symbiotic relationship between platformization and the broader socio-cultural context, with each informing the other. They detail how platforms shape our perceptions, dictate information visibility, and reconfigure social hierarchies. They also highlight the nuanced intersections of platforms with socio-political elements like gender, race, and class, deepening our understanding of digital disparities and power structures.

In conclusion, platformization represents a pivotal transformation, driven by technological advancements, evolving socio-economic dynamics, and shifting cultural contexts. This shift has not only reshaped our interactions with the digital world but also underpinned a restructuring of the power dynamics at play in the broader societal and economic landscape. Theoretical frameworks, such as the network society and information society models, provide critical insight into the complex interplay of these elements, elucidating how platforms emerge as integrative nodes in our interconnected society and central agents in an information-driven economy. Concurrently, platform studies dissect the structural implications of these shifts, investigating the changing political, economic, and cultural ramifications of the expanding platform economy. Through their intricate examination, they reveal platforms as more than just neutral technical infrastructures. They underscore platforms' active roles in shaping societal structures, mediating information flows, influencing user behaviours, and propelling economic shifts. It is this understanding that positions platforms not only as reflections of the digital age but also as its architects, signalling the critical role of platform studies in navigating our increasingly platformized

world. Whether through the lens of economics, politics, or culture, the study of platforms and platformization underscores their transformative potential and inherent challenges, ultimately shaping our collective experiences in the digital era.

2.2. Platform Power

In the contemporary discourse on digital platforms, three interrelated concepts have rapidly gained prominence within academic discourse: platform power, platform politics, and platform governance. Rooted in the transformative nature of digital platforms, these concepts offer an analytical lens to understand the intricate dynamics shaping our online experiences and their cascading effects on society at large. *Platform power* subtly underscores the capacity of platforms to influence, shape, and sometimes even steer ideologies, user behaviors, market dynamics, and information flows. Intertwined with this, *platform politics* examines the contested terrains of these digital entities, interrogating how they intersect with public discourses, democratic processes, and broader societal structures (Gillespie, 2010). Meanwhile, *platform governance* encapsulates the political systems, mechanisms, policies, and norms that guide platform operation and interaction, with implications for user rights, content moderation, and data management (Duffy & Meisner, 2023). As scholars such as Gillespie (2010), van Dijck et al. (2018), and Helmond (2015) have observed, these concepts don't operate in isolation but are deeply interconnected, shaping, and being shaped by each other. Navigating through the nuances of these interrelations, this literature review offers an analytical engagement with these constructs, elucidating the multifaceted ways they mold the digital world and, in turn, the contours of contemporary society.

The existing academic literature provides a multifaceted understanding of platform power, delineating both its overt operational structures and its more subtle societal and cultural ramifications. For example, one major focus in the literature is the economic power of platforms. At its core, the economic perspective views platforms as dominant players in the current phase of capitalism. Their ability to gather, monopolize, and monetize vast swaths of user data turns them into highly valuable entities, beyond the tangible services they offer. Drawing primarily from Srnicek (2018) and Zuboff's work, we can

understand platforms as pivotal nodes in contemporary capitalistic systems. Srnicek posits platforms as central agents in the evolution of capitalism, transitioning from traditional service or production-based models to one fueled by data extraction. Platforms' inherent value is not merely in the services they provide but in their ability to monopolize vast amounts of user data, transforming it into a commercial commodity. Zuboff, on the other hand, highlights the commodification of personal data, arguing that platforms function within a surveillance capitalistic paradigm where personal data is not just harvested but is utilized to influence user behaviors, creating a feedback loop that further entrenches platform power. From these perspectives, analytical efforts hone in on the data extraction processes, the commodification of user behaviors, and the market dynamics this produces. Questions arise concerning monopolistic behaviors, the actual value of data, and potential threats to economic competition and innovation.

The next major conceptualization of power in platforms and platformization studies, is the socio-cultural power these entities wield. From this perspective, platforms not only serve as economic entities but also profoundly influence socio-cultural dynamics. According to Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018), platforms shape personal communications, dissemination practices, and cultural expressions. They become active participants in dictating societal norms, from determining visibility and virality to molding perceptions about acceptability and popularity. In this view, platformization integrates with broader cultural processes, reshaping how society communicates, engages, and even forms identities. Burgess & Green (2009) further this perspective by highlighting platforms' democratization of cultural production, allowing for greater inclusivity, but with the caveat of potential exploitation. The socio-cultural lens on platform power, therefore, captures how platforms mediate and even mold societal norms, behaviors, and expressions. By dictating the rules of content visibility, virality, and community engagement, platforms become cultural trendsetters. Here, analysis inquiries into how platforms influence societal behavior, from defining popular culture to modulating interpersonal interactions. The emergence of new digital subcultures shifts in communication patterns, and the transformation of societal norms under platform influence become central analytical concerns.

Next, as platforms have grown in their reach and influence, so has their entanglement with political processes and governance mechanisms. Caplan & Gillespie (2020) have articulated concerns regarding platforms' roles as de facto regulators of speech, content, and even socio-political mobilizations. Their ability to define what constitutes "acceptable content," paired with algorithms that dictate content visibility, means that platforms have significant sway over public discourse and the shaping of political narratives. Van Dijck (2018) and colleagues extend this notion, suggesting that platforms transform traditional governance structures, thereby necessitating novel approaches to ensure accountability and fairness. From these perspectives, platforms, given their vast user bases and informational control, wield significant political influence. Beyond just being neutral tech entities, they are involved, often contentiously, in shaping political discourse, mobilizations, and even electoral outcomes. Here, the central concern is the interface between platforms and political processes. Issues of content censorship, platform neutrality, algorithmic biases, and the platforms' role in elections or mobilizations become key analytical focal points. The overarching question: How do platforms shape, and how should they be shaped by, political processes?

Another perspective on platform power in academic literature from platform studies emphasizes platforms' power over knowledge and information. In a digital age, platforms often become primary information gatekeepers (Gillespie, 2018). Through intricate and often opaque algorithms, they dictate what information becomes visible, reputable, and influential. As such, platforms do not just mediate information; they play a determinative role in its creation, distribution, and valuation. Pasquale (2015), in his seminal work "The Black Box Society," underscores the opaque nature of algorithms that order and rank information on platforms, articulating the algorithmic power of platforms. These algorithmic choices, often shielded from public scrutiny, profoundly influence public knowledge and perceptions. Beer (2016) further critiques the lack of transparency, contending that platforms' control over information not only dictates visibility but also molds societal values and norms, often in alignment with platforms' commercial interests. Exemplified by these studies, the analytical spotlight here shines on the power dynamics, mechanics, and implications of algorithmic governance on digital platforms. How do

platforms' algorithms prioritize certain content over others? What biases are inherent in these choices? And critically, what are the societal implications of vesting so much control over public knowledge in the hands of a few platforms?

Last, academics interested in platform power have also considered the relational power of platforms. From this angle, platforms are viewed as relational hubs, mediating the interactions between diverse user groups. They hold power in determining the terms of these interactions, often leading to power imbalances where certain stakeholders (like the platform owners) benefit disproportionately. Drawing on the idea that platforms mediate relationships between various actors (from consumers to advertisers to platform owners), scholars like Terranova (2000), Flew (2015), and Fuchs (2014; 2020) highlight the power dynamics inherent in these relations. Platforms can shape the terms of engagement, often resulting in imbalances where users, especially those providing content or data, are disadvantaged. For instance, the "free labor" provided by users, sometimes called "playbour" (Scholz, 2017; 2013) is commodified by platforms, resulting in benefits primarily for the platform and its stakeholders, rather than the broader user base (Terranova, 2000; Jarrett, 2015; Jarrett & Fuchs, 2019). Ultimately, the relational perspective prompts a deep dive into the networks fostered by platforms, examining power dynamics, value extraction, and potential exploitative patterns. Analytical queries emerge from this angle about the true beneficiaries of platform-mediated exchanges, the nature of digital labour, and potential avenues for more equitable digital ecosystems.

In conclusion, the conceptualization of "platform power" is not monolithic; it's multifarious, evolving, and deeply contextual. Crucially, platforms can be perceived as political actors that frame the conditions of participation, thereby exercising a form of "soft power" (Nye, 2004) that subtly influences the behavior and decisions of content creators. It manifests in economic mechanisms, but also in the intricacies of culture, politics, relationships, and knowledge dissemination. Engaging deeply with these academic insights allows us to unravel the layers of platform influence, helping society navigate the challenges and opportunities posed by platform-dominated digital landscapes. Importantly, each

conception of platform power not only sheds light on a distinct facet of platform influence but also channels analytical endeavors in particular directions.

2.3. Platform Politics

Beyond the recognition of platforms as mere technical infrastructures or market-driven systems, the growing body of literature acknowledges not only their profound role as influential socio-political actors in our society but also that the politics inherent in platform power is intricate and multifaceted. What makes platform power inherently political is its capacity to shape, direct, and sometimes even manipulate public discourse, democratic processes, market dynamics, and cultural norms. Such influence is not merely passive; platforms actively curate, prioritize, and mediate digital experiences, thereby establishing hierarchies of visibility and significance (Ibrahim, 2010; Introna & Nissenbaum, 2000). This act of determining what is seen and unheard, what narratives gain traction, and which ones are marginalized, is deeply political (Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Bucher, 2012). Furthermore, the ways in which platforms interact with various stakeholders—from governments seeking regulatory control, to advertisers wanting a slice of user attention, to activists pushing for more transparency and accountability—reflects the contested terrain of platform politics (Gillespie, 2018). The politics of platform power also encompasses the strategic decisions platforms make in response to societal pressure, regulatory oversight, and market incentives (Zhang, 2020; Bivens & Haimson, 2016). In this context, the choices platforms make, intentionally or inadvertently, can reinforce existing power structures, give rise to new digital elites, or challenge established societal norms, making the study of this politics not just academically enriching but also crucial for understanding the trajectory of our digital societies.

To illustrate, revisiting Gillespie's scholarly contributions, he spearheaded the examination of the political dimensions of platforms, with a particular emphasis on their role in unintentionally or intentionally regulating speech and public discourse (Gillespie 2010, 2018). Gillespie’s article, “the politics of platforms” argues that platforms, by acting as curators, gatekeepers, and intermediaries of online content, are not passive conduits but active participants in shaping information landscapes–despite

their egalitarian, technologically neutral appearance. Platforms' rules and algorithms, he argues, often shrouded in secrecy, decide which content is visible and accessible, and which is not, thereby exercising a form of "editorial control." This power to moderate, Gillespie argues, is deeply political. While platforms may assert that their content moderation policies are neutral and designed to foster a safe, respectful online environment, Gillespie exposes the inherent biases and inconsistencies in these policies. He also scrutinizes the opaque processes through which platforms enforce their rules, noting how they can privilege certain voices, marginalize others, and ultimately shape the contours of public discourse. This critical perspective from Gillespie unravels the politics of platforms in terms of their role as gatekeepers of information, their discretionary power in content curation and moderation, and the implications these have for democratic dialogue and plurality of voices in the digital realm.

Van Dijck's perspective extends the understanding of the 'politics of platforms' beyond their direct impact on content and discourse, by situating them within broader socio-economic systems (Van Dijck, 2013). She observes that platforms, by their technological architecture and business models, negotiate a complex web of relationships with a multitude of actors in their ecosystem, including users, third-party developers, advertisers, and governments. These relationships are inherently political because of the power dynamics involved and the differing economic interests at play. Van Dijck probes into these power dynamics, arguing that platforms wield considerable control over their ecosystems, influencing behaviours, norms, and market structures. For instance, platforms' decisions about how to collect, analyze, and monetize user data can have far-reaching impacts on privacy norms and data ownership rights. Similarly, their rules and policies can shape the competitive landscape and potentially stifle innovation. Van Dijck's perspective illuminates the economic and institutional politics entangled in platforms, emphasizing their active, strategic role within socio-economic structures and processes.

Expanding the scope to a more systemic level, Srnicek's work (2016) dissects the politics of platforms from a global political-economic perspective, examining how platforms reconfigure traditional capitalist structures, including market dynamics, labour practices, and value extraction methods. As discussed earlier, Srnicek asserts that digital platforms have evolved into central hubs within our

economic systems, leveraging their unique positions to amass significant volumes of data and influence economic interactions. Through the commodification of data, transforming it into a valuable asset, platforms inaugurate an era of 'data capitalism' where data capture, analysis, and monetization supplant conventional forms of capital accumulation. Regarding platform politics, Srnicek's insights into labour politics provide a pivotal exploration of how platforms reshape labour relations and market dynamics. He elucidates how platforms, through their roles as 'mediators and monopolizers' of access to marketplaces and consumers, instigate a politics around restructuring work, resulting in emerging forms of alienation, exploitation, and struggle linked to not only social interaction but precarious, gig-oriented labour. Srnicek's contributions augment our understanding of platform politics, emphasizing the broader economic implications and the ways these platforms are redefining our conceptions of value, labour, and capitalism.

Deepening this discourse from a primarily political science disciplinary focus, Siva Vaidhyanathan's perspective posits that the politics of platforms is connected to their influence over societal institutions and political processes, specifically democracy (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). Platform politics, he elucidates, is not a mere offshoot of technological advancement, but rather an emergent realm where platforms on a global scale exert substantial influence, redefining fundamental societal constructs, especially political systems. As platforms ubiquitously serve as the primary conduits for global information dissemination and discourse facilitation, they have inevitably been transformed into central public squares in which democratic politics now fundamentally takes place. This transformation, however, anchors a new political arena where platform politics intertwines with the broader material political landscape. Vaidhyanathan deconstructs the mechanics of this political arena, highlighting how algorithmic systems greatly impact public discourse and debate, offering platforms the potential to both amplify and suppress political narratives and interests due to their proximity to influencing these algorithms.

This dynamic of algorithmic power results in a cascading effect, as platform politics intersects with and often influences mainstream political sentiments, electoral dynamics, and even outcomes of

political systems. This dynamic of algorithmic power results in a cascading effect, as platform politics intersects with and often influences mainstream political sentiments, electoral dynamics, and even outcomes. For instance, during the 2016 United States Presidential Election, it was reported that Facebook's algorithmic curation of news potentially swayed voters by promoting specific stories while downplaying others, effectively curating a unique information environment for each user (Bump, 2018). Another illustrative example is Brazil's 2018 presidential race, where WhatsApp played a pivotal role, with reports suggesting that mass message forwarding led to the rapid spread of disinformation, shaping voter perceptions, and influencing political leanings (Evangelista & Bruno, 2019). Lastly, in Myanmar, Facebook was criticized for its inability to effectively regulate hate speech on its platform, which the United Nations identified as playing a significant role in fueling the Rohingya humanitarian crisis (Amnesty International, 2022). The aforementioned empirical instances highlight the significant and diverse influence of platform politics concerning algorithms on global political environments. By drawing attention to these types of instances, scholars such as Vaidhyanathan (2018), demonstrate the tangible and sometimes seismic repercussions of platform politics on global electoral events.

Platform politics, as a theoretical framework, spotlights the complex network of power dynamics, governance systems, and normative practices that platforms host to influence digital interactions, the dissemination of information, and cultural manifestations. The lens under consideration has emerged as a prominent area of focus in current platform studies, prompting scholars to investigate the contentious dimensions of platform operations (Cobbe, 2021; Bucher, 2012; 2018). These investigations encompass a range of topics, including content moderation, algorithmic biases, data sovereignty, privacy concerns, and the implications for digital labour. Scholars concerned with platform power, aim to reveal the underlying power mechanisms within platform architectures, policies, and algorithmic decision-making through their examination of the politics of platforms. This trajectory of exploration seeks to shed light on the implications of platform dominance for various aspects such as politics, economics, democracy, social justice, and the future of our interconnected world. It recognizes that platforms, through their design, operations, and implications, wield power and influence that intersect with social, cultural, economic, and

regulatory dimensions. This influence has been studied from various angles, including the examination of platform governance, algorithmic power, content moderation, data privacy, labour practices, market dominance, and the broader socio-political implications of platformization. These perspectives in the discourse on platform power and politics collectively illuminate the intricate dynamics and power relations within the platform ecosystem, shedding light on the complex interplay between platforms, users, and the wider socio-political landscape.

2.4. Platform Governance

Platform governance, as derived from platform studies literature, emerges as a pivotal concept that bridges the intricate dynamics of platform power and platform politics. Grounded in the technical, economic, and social infrastructures of platforms, "platform governance" encompasses the policies, regulations, and mechanisms through which platforms manage and orchestrate their vast user ecosystems. Whereas platform power delineates the asymmetric relations between platform owners and other stakeholders, and platform politics elucidates the myriad ways in which platforms become arenas for socio-political contestation, platform governance offers a lens into the codified and often opaque rules that underpin these interactions. The concept sheds light on how platforms, as quasi-public spaces, exercise control over user behavior, content distribution, and data management, effectively shaping the digital experiences of billions (van Dijck et al., 2021; Tiidenberg, 2021). While platform studies have historically been keen on unearthing the hidden logics of algorithms and platform designs, the evolution of platform governance demands a more holistic interrogation, intertwining the technocratic aspects with broader sociocultural and political implications.

With that being said, platform governance is often used an umbrella term to capture an array of entangled processes that engender the internal and external regulatory dynamics, the impact of platform interfaces and their afforded features, and the evolving relationship between platforms, users, and society at large (Tiidenberg, 2021, 392). This multidimensional understanding of platform governance underscores its complexity, highlighting the depth and breadth of influence platforms have in shaping

digital interactions and experiences. For instance, Gillespie's (2010) research into the governance dynamics of platforms like YouTube, exposing how their 'public' character is mediated through policies that influence what gets uploaded, viewed, and monetized. This showcases platform governance not merely as technical management but as a site of cultural production and power. Similarly, van Dijck (2013) explores the interplay between technology, business models, and user practices on social media platforms, suggesting that platform governance shapes, and is shaped by, sociocultural, economic, and political forces. Such insights reveal that platform governance is not simply about operational policies but includes the normative values encoded within algorithms and data practices.

Another illustrative example comes from Helmond (2015), who highlights Facebook's governance mechanisms. By continuously adapting its Application Programming Interface (API), Facebook governs third-party developers, content circulation, and user data access—highlighting platform governance's role in control. Last, Plantin et al. (2018) emphasizes the importance of infrastructural interdependencies in platform ecosystems. They discuss how the governance of one platform, such as Google Maps, can affect an array of applications and services built on its infrastructure. Moreover, Srnicek's (2017) investigation into platform capitalism drives home the point that platform governance also involves shaping economic behaviors, where platforms act as intermediaries and shape market dynamics through governance mechanisms. Collectively, these examples from key literature highlight platform governance's multifaceted nature, revealing it as a dynamic, interwoven system of technical, social, and economic dimensions that shape and are shaped by myriad stakeholders in the digital realm. These studies, taken together, emphasize that platform governance in platform studies is not a monolithic construct but rather a nuanced and multifaceted framework, encompassing a variety of dimensions from content moderation to economic structuring.

Following the extensive exploration of the myriad ways platforms influence digital interactions, it's evident that the concept of platform governance is neither static nor unilateral. The evolution of platform studies has seen the discipline adapt and expand the platform governance framework to decipher the multifaceted intricacies of how governance—defined as the system of rules, practices, and processes

by which a system is directed and controlled—is enacted from varied vantage points and methodologies. As platforms grow in ubiquity and influence, the need for nuanced analytical approaches in platform studies has become paramount, resulting in the field being approached from diverse angles, each offering a unique lens on the governance dynamic. Building on this understanding, the literature has framed platform governance in three crucial aspects of governance in the context of platforms: governance of platforms (external regulation), governance by platforms (internal regulation), and governance on platforms (user and community regulation). This framework, initially framed by Gillespie (2018), provides a more holistic lens to scrutinize the complex political dynamics of platform governance.

The "governance of platforms" pertains primarily to the external regulatory measures imposed upon digital platforms by entities beyond their immediate ecosystem—most commonly, state actors, legal systems, international coalitions, and advocacy groups. Helmond (2015) notes that as platforms have become more integrated into the societal fabric, they have attracted increased attention from legislative bodies aiming to regulate their ever-expanding influence, particularly in realms like user privacy, data rights, and content management. For example, the European Union's *General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR) exemplifies a governmental response to regulate platforms' handling of user data. The nexus of power, within this governance facet, often shifts between platform operators and external regulators. Poell, Nieborg, and van Dijck (2019) argue that such external regulation can potentially reshape platforms' operational dynamics, affecting their political economy, but often can be reactive, addressing issues that have already surfaced, rather than being pre-emptive. Bruns (2019) further elucidates this by emphasizing the reactive nature of such external governance, where regulatory actions tend to chase the technological and societal advancements platforms foster. This reactive dynamic, although necessary, exposes the latent challenges in anticipating the multifarious implications of platform growth and influence.

In contrast, "governance by platforms" digs into the innate regulatory mechanisms employed by the platforms themselves, or better understood as the platform’s corporate operators. Here, the power dynamics are deeply embedded within the platform's internal policies, algorithms, and design choices, all

of which steer user interactions in specific directions. Gillespie (2010) underscores that platforms actively craft their policies, interfaces, and algorithms to not only respond to user needs but also to cater to their commercial imperatives, often prioritizing monetization strategies over equitable content distribution. This form of governance is where the politics of platform visibility, amplification, and suppression come to the forefront. The deployment of algorithms for content moderation or the shaping of user feeds, as Srnicek (2017) points out, constitutes a form of soft power where platforms subtly guide user behavior and content visibility. However, the politics of this governance by platforms is multilayered.

Building upon this perspective, the nuances of algorithmic interventions become central in assessing platforms' influence in their governance. Algorithms—these unseen yet pervasive mechanisms on social media platforms—craft a tailored mosaic of content based on individual user preferences (Bucher, 2018, 2017; Gillespie, 2014). By analyzing user behaviors, preferences, and interactions, these algorithms curate content hierarchies and forge personalized user experiences (Bucher, 2021; Pasquale, 2015). Their role isn't restricted to mere content curation. They also venture into the politically nuanced arena of content moderation, proactively screening and filtering content that breaches platform norms, ensuring the platform's envisioned ethos remains intact (Common, 2020; Gorwa et al., 2020). As digital gatekeepers, algorithms significantly influence the information ecosystem (Cobbe, 2021; Meyers West, 2017), with the inherent power to both highlight and obscure, thereby affecting user visibility and representation online (Common, 2020; Graham, Schroeder, & Taylor, 2013).

Platform algorithms operate not just at a functional level but are deeply entwined with the affective dimensions of user engagement (Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Kochling & Claus Wehner, 2020; Noble, 2018). Van Dijck et al. (2018) suggest that the digital scaffolding provided by platforms—spanning their affordances, interfaces, and embedded cues—directly cultivates specific user behaviors and responses. This is particularly salient in how platforms control visibility. Beyond the overt curations, platforms manipulate users' emotional landscapes, a concept Pasquale (2015) dubs as "affective computing." This refers to platforms harnessing user data to tap into emotional triggers, fostering a complex web of dependencies. In this vein, Crawford (2016) discusses the notion of "listening

infrastructures," alluding to platforms' covert mechanisms to 'listen' to user emotions, reactions, and behaviors, subtly modulating content exposure in real-time. The orchestration of such affective power and control deepens platforms' dominance, revealing an intricate dance between user autonomy and platform-driven determinism.

Not only do platform companies control what gets seen via algorithms, but they also strategically respond to criticism, adapting their systems in ways that may appear transparent but still retain their primary control. Such strategic adaptability, Bucher (2018) suggests, ensures that platforms remain at the helm of their digital influence, navigating between user demands, commercial interests, and societal scrutiny. In doing so, the platform company governs through their proximity to control and shape their affordances, interfaces, and embedded cues, constantly fine-tuning them to ensure a balance between user satisfaction and the achievement of their broader strategic goals. Helmond (2015) posits that this continuous recalibration is essential for platforms, allowing them to foster an environment that remains conducive for both advertisers and users. In a sense, platforms orchestrate a multifaceted theater of digital interactions, wherein users believe they are in control while platforms subtly guide the narrative. Thus, governance by platforms can be succinctly defined as the ways in which platform operators employ algorithms, policies, design choices, and community guidelines to regulate and shape the content, interactions, and behaviors within their digital environments. This form of governance is internal, stemming from the platforms' operational frameworks and their commercial and ideological imperatives.

Finally, "governance on platforms" shifts our attention to the self-regulatory measures adopted by platform users and communities themselves. Governance on platforms examines the more nuanced and intricate relationship between the user communities and the platform structures. The emphasis in this framework is on how users—both as individuals and as collectives—navigate, and sometimes negotiate, the confines set by platforms. A key underpinning of this form of governance is the users' ability and desire to create and cultivate their own spaces, even within restrictive platform environments. Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández (2016) emphasize this dynamism, noting the organic evolution of user-defined rules, norms, and cultures. Sometimes, these user-created structures align neatly with platform guidelines;

other times, they represent a direct challenge or alternative to them. This resilience and adaptability of user communities speak to their ability to carve out pockets of agency amidst a platform's power structures.

It is also crucial to understand the strategies users employ when engaging with platforms, especially when they seek to resist or subvert platform constraints. A closer look reveals a spectrum of tactics: from the overt, like challenging platform policies, to the more covert, like using coded language to bypass algorithmic censors. Users may re-appropriate affordances for "off-label" purposes, deviating from their initially prescribed functions to adapt to novel social contexts or accommodate emergent communication needs (Duguay, 2020; McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015). This dynamic interplay between the platform's technical features and users' creative agency exemplifies the inherently social aspect of affordances, highlighting their capacity to evolve in response to the ever-changing landscape of digital interactions (Velkova & Kaun, 2021; Cotter, 2018; van Dijck, 2009). Together, the socio-technical co-shapes the dimensions of users' experiences and engagement (Bucher et al., 2018) by establishing channels for connection, and outlining the modes of participation within the platform ecosystem (Cunningham & Craig, 2019).

Crawford and Gillespie (2016) illustrate how such user strategies, fueled by a need for visibility or dissent, can lead to the creation of alternative spaces within platforms, governed by distinct norms and cultures. In these spaces, power dynamics shift. Influential users or community leaders often emerge, wielding significant authority and guiding the community's interactions and behaviors. Yet, this agency is not without its complications. Gillespie (2015) points out that platforms, recognizing the power and influence of these user communities, may strategically co-opt such self-governance mechanisms. This co-option serves a dual purpose: it can give platforms an aura of democratization while simultaneously allowing them to offload some of the burdens of governance, namely content moderation, onto the users themselves. Such maneuvers can lead to tensions where the line between user agency and platform control is blurred. It raises questions about the genuine autonomy of user communities and underscores the need to continually reassess the power dynamics in the ever-evolving digital realm.

2.5. Platform Users

In platform studies, the centrality of users in platform governance cannot be understated. As Langlois and Elmer (2013) posit, platforms have emerged not merely as technical infrastructures but as socio-technical systems, with users as active co-constructors of their digital realities. Their role extends beyond passive consumption; they act as interlocutors, shaping the platform's evolution and being reciprocally shaped by it (Helmond, 2015). Gillespie (2018) underscores this symbiotic relationship, contending that while platforms present an architecture of participation, it is the users who breathe life into it, giving it purpose, content, and context. Similarly, van Dijck (2013) emphasizes the intertwined dynamics of platforms and their user bases, illustrating how users, through their interactions and engagements, contribute significantly to the "platformization" of the web. While the underlying algorithms and business models of platforms lay down the structures, users, with their myriad activities and choices, define the vibrancy and variability of the digital realm (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Cobbe, 2021; Velkova & Kaun, 2021). Their actions and interactions on platforms have an impact on the creation, dissemination, and reception of platforms, as well as the subsequent shaping of social dynamics and power relations that arise as a result of them. (Gillespie, 2018; Marwick, 2013). Understanding "platform users" thus becomes pivotal, not merely as endpoints of communication but as central agents in the ever-evolving platform ecosystems.

Historically, media users in legacy media systems were primarily conceived as passive consumers—audience members taking in content crafted by others. This conceptualization, rooted in the broadcast era of the 20th century, underwent a significant metamorphosis with the advent of digital technology. Toffler (1981) anticipated this shift with his introduction of "prosumption", suggesting an impending convergence between production and consumption. This blending hinted at a future where consumers would actively engage with, and even produce, content, thus eroding the established boundaries between traditional content creators and their audiences. The democratizing potential of social media platforms was a catalyst in realizing Toffler's vision. On platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, users not only consumed content but were empowered to "talk-back", remix, and co-create,

effectively blurring the lines between professional content producers and everyday users. Burgess and Green (2009) observed this phenomenon on YouTube, noting the emergence of a participatory culture where "everyday users" evolved into "everyday producers". The inherent design and affordances of such platforms—like shareability, ease of content creation, and algorithmic recommendations—did not just encourage passive consumption; they nurtured active prosumption.

While this form of prosumption was transformative, another subtle yet profound layer emerged: the production of data. As users engaged, shared, clicked, or even simply navigated these platforms, they inadvertently produced vast troves of data—digital footprints captured and commodified by platforms. This data, as van Dijck (2013) emphasizes, positions users as inadvertent producers in the platform's digital economy. Their interactions, far from being benign activities, contribute to intricate data ecosystems that platforms leverage for profit, personalization, and power dynamics. The surge of "datafication"—the transformation of various aspects of life into data—has elevated the significance of user activities on platforms (Cukier & Mayer-Schoenberg, 2013). Every action, be it a click, share, like, geotagging, or even the duration of viewing, gets transformed into a data point, feeding into the colossal reservoirs of 'big data' (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013). As van Dijck (2014) and boyd and Crawford (2012) articulate, this vast expanse of data is not a mere by-product of digital interactions; it is the lifeblood of contemporary platform capitalism.

Platforms, operating under the guise of 'free services', employ sophisticated algorithms that survey, capture, and analyze these vast data traces left by users, manifesting a new age of corporate surveillance (Zuboff, 2015). However, the objective goes beyond mere observation. This captured data undergoes a metamorphosis, from raw information to monetizable commodity, positioning users not just as consumers but also as products themselves. Their digital traces are packaged, commodified, and often sold to the highest bidders—usually advertisers seeking targeted advertising capabilities (Fuchs, 2017; Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Furthermore, as Srnicek (2017) points out, the digital economy's very architecture is rooted in this commodification. Platforms, in their quest for profit maximization, have developed sophisticated tools and practices to extract maximum value from these data ecosystems.

Personalization algorithms, which promise to enhance user experience, simultaneously serve the dual purpose of further ensnaring users in platform ecosystems, ensuring a continual flow of data. In this landscape, the politics of prosumption evolves. Users, while enjoying unprecedented levels of content creation and curation, simultaneously find themselves ensnared in intricate webs of surveillance, commodification, and power asymmetry, redefining the contours of user agency in the digital age.

Emerging from these discussions on data production and commodification, the idea of 'free labour' becomes pivotal, precisely as framed by Tiziana Terranova (2000). In her seminal work, Terranova sheds light on the extensive, often non-remunerated work users undertake in the digital sphere. This notion of 'free labour' dovetails with Lazzarato's (1996) concept of 'immaterial labour', which describes activities that do not produce physical goods but generate cultural content, knowledge, or a social relationship. Immaterial labour, which encompasses activities tied to information and cultural production, resonates deeply with how users engage on platforms. They do not merely produce content; they actively participate in shaping digital cultures, aesthetics, and values, generating intangible assets that platforms subsequently capitalize on. On platforms, this immaterial labour is manifested when users generate memes, share insights, or simply build relationships, thereby adding value to the digital ecosystem. Research by scholars such as Andrejevic (2009), Morozov (2012), van Dijck (2009), and Faucher (2014, 2018) underscores the integral role of users as active agents who, through their digital labour, contribute to shaping the platform ecosystem.

Complicating this landscape further is the dimension of 'affective labour', a term Hardt and Negri (2000) introduce. Affective labour–also sometimes called emotional labour–pertains, in general, to the production and manipulation of emotions and is often intertwined with immaterial labour. Within the context of platforms, affective labour can be seen in how users cultivate online communities, foster relationships, or even simply express support or dissent in comment sections. While seemingly intangible, these emotional and relational exchanges hold immense value, as platforms leverage them to foster engagement, drive user retention, and even shape advertising strategies. This power imbalance

underscores a core tension in platform studies: the juxtaposition of immense value generation by users and the skewed benefits reaped by platform owners.

Accordingly, a striking paradox emerges in this digital labour landscape for many users. Despite the tangible and intangible value users continually generate, they often remain either uncompensated or undercompensated. Even more concerning is the prevalent unawareness or underestimation among users of the real economic implications and value extraction mechanisms of their online interactions. Platform studies scholars have explored into the psyche of the user, seeking to unravel the motivations that propel continuous engagement under conditions that may seem exploitative. A key driver, as Bucher (2012) posits, is the integration of technological relations within broader social dynamics. In the age of the attention economy, where attention is both a scarce resource and a prized commodity (Goldhaber, 1997), platforms thrive by capitalizing on users' inherent desire for validation and recognition. The rise of micro-celebrity culture (Senft, 2013; Abidin, 2018; 2016; Duguay 2019) further entrenches this dynamic, as users aspire for virality and online fame, often blurring the boundaries between personal passions and the allure of potential monetization. Additionally, as scholars like Marwick and boyd (2011) emphasize, the digital and material worlds are no longer discrete; they overlap and intertwine. Engaging online is not a mere optional activity; it's deeply embedded in the fabric of contemporary social life, making the extraction from these platforms not just technically challenging but socially and personally costly. Such intricate melding of the digital and physical realms, combined with the platforms' adept leveraging of social desires and aspirations, ensures that users remain tethered, continuously producing value.

By critically examining how users interact with and navigate platforms, harness technical affordances, and engage in the politics of appropriating algorithms, platform studies have illuminated the potential for resistance, empowerment, and transformative change within the landscape of platform power. Within the ecosystem of digital platforms, user communities emerge as spaces of shared interests, values, and interactions that often transcend the virtual realm. Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández (2016) highlight that users actively participate in the co-creation of community norms and practices, constituting forms of self-governance that both align with and challenge official platform guidelines. These

community-driven governance strategies are particularly evident in the development of content flagging systems, where users collaboratively identify and regulate content that violates community standards (Gillespie, 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Notably, such practices underscore the decentralized nature of governance on platforms, with influential users and community leaders playing pivotal roles in shaping these norms (Bucher, 2018).

The power dynamics inherent in self-governance are complex, however. As Gillespie (2015) suggests, platforms may co-opt community-driven efforts to offload content moderation responsibilities, thereby maintaining control over content policies and avoiding potential liability. This highlights the intricate interplay between user agency and platform control, where user-generated rules and norms can be leveraged to serve platform interests (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). The emergence of user-driven alternative spaces within platforms, such as subreddits on Reddit or hashtags on Twitter, further showcases how users can mold platform affordances to cultivate unique communities with distinct governance norms (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). These decentralized governance structures, in platform studies, have necessitated a nuanced understanding of the power dynamics within user communities, as well as the broader implications for platform politics and the negotiation of visibility and power on digital platforms.

In this realm, studies have examined users' strategic and creative engagement with platform interfaces and technical affordances to challenge and subverting existing power structures, giving rise to 'the algorithmic politics of repair' (Neff et al., 2012; Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Cobbe 2021; Velkova & Kaun, 2021). Through re-appropriation of platform features, such as algorithmic content distribution and moderation, users can construct counter-publics, amplify marginalized voices, and foster alternative digital economies that resist the dominance of platform capitalism (Fuchs, 2019, 2020; Tufekci, 2017). This act of re-appropriation exemplifies the agency and resilience of users within digital spaces, highlighting their ability to challenge and resist the control exerted by platforms and their algorithms (Velkova & Kaun, 2021; Cobbe 2021; Duguay, 2020). By delving into the complexities of community-driven norms and their interactions with platform policies, this dimension of platform governance

research, taken together, enhances our understanding of the dynamic interplay between user agency, platform control, and the sociocultural dynamics of digital communities. The exploration of user communities and self-governance within the platform ecosystem provides insights into how users actively shape and negotiate the norms, practices, and content governance strategies within these digital spaces.

Ultimately, the relationship between platforms and their users is riddled with inherent challenges and tensions that punctuate the digital landscape. Central to these is the issue of autonomy and agency. While users are endowed with the tools to create, share, and curate content, the degree to which they truly exercise autonomous decision-making within these platforms is a matter of contention. Gillespie (2018) asserts that algorithms, far from being neutral tools, often prioritize platform objectives, subtly guiding users along paths that maximize platform gains while sidelining user welfare. This often manifests in the 'filter bubble' phenomenon (Pariser, 2011; Flaxman et al., 2016), where algorithms curate content streams to align with perceived user preferences, inadvertently trapping them in ideological echo chambers and limiting exposure to diverse perspectives.

Further, platforms perpetually grapple with the tug-of-war between user rights, such as freedom of speech, and the maintenance of a safe online environment. Social media platforms especially have been scrutinized for their content moderation policies, where they have been accused of either stifling voices or inadequately addressing hate speech and misinformation (Roberts, 2019). As users seek to assert their rights, platforms, in turn, refine their community guidelines, frequently causing confusion and accusations of inconsistency in policy enforcement (Gillespie, 2015). Adding to this complex matrix is the perennial concern of privacy. Amid the digital labour users invest in platforms, they inadvertently become the product, with their data being commodified and traded in opaque data marketplaces (Zuboff, 2019). This has raised ethical concerns about consent and the extent to which users are genuinely cognizant of how their data is leveraged and monetized. Van Dijck (2013) cogently argues that while platforms present themselves as free services, users pay with their data, often unwittingly. As the digital ecosystem evolves, tensions between user agency, platform control, and external regulatory interventions continue to shape

the contours of user-platform relationships, necessitating a perpetual re-evaluation of the ethics, implications, and power dynamics at play.

2.6. Deplatformization and Deplatforming: Navigating Digital Exclusion

Power dynamics and political tensions manifest not only in how platforms operate but also in who gets to participate or is marginalized from these online ecosystems. The phenomena of "deplatforming" and "deplatformization" emerge as critical flashpoints in these discussions. Rooted in platform governance and deeply intertwined with issues of platform power and politics, these concepts elucidate the ways platforms, intentionally or otherwise, exclude or marginalize entities—be it individual users, groups, or content—from their systems (Gillespie, 2018). While the broader notion of governance has been explored in its multifaceted dimensions—from external regulations to user-led interventions—the act of exclusion, whether enforced or systemic, represents a unique intersection of platform agency and user vulnerabilities (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Cobbe, 2021). At its core, deplatforming often centers around individual exclusions, such as bans or suspensions, provoked by violations of community guidelines or broader public pressures. In contrast, deplatformization, a relatively nascent term in platform studies, investigates into more pervasive and systemic marginalization, often embedded in platform algorithms, designs, or policies (Noble, 2018). Before delving into the intricate nuances of these phenomena, it is imperative to understand their genesis, their evolving narratives in platform studies, and their profound implications for platform users, politics, and the digital sociocultural fabric at large.

The emergence of deplatforming and deplatformization as focal concerns in platform studies can be traced to the intensifying struggles over control, authority, and visibility in online spaces. Historically, the inception of online platforms promised democratized access to information and a more equitable distribution of voices in media (Benkler et al., 2015). As platforms matured and their commercial imperatives became clearer, however, the nuances of who gets to speak, and under what conditions, began to shift (Gillespie, 2010). Incidents like the banning of controversial figures, initially celebrated as platforms taking responsibility, were also met with accusations of censorship and bias, thrusting the issue

of deplatforming into the limelight (Tufekci, 2017). Simultaneously, there were growing concerns about systemic biases inherent in platform algorithms and structures, leading scholars like Noble (2018) to interrogate the invisible architectures that perpetuate inequalities, thus paving the way for discourses on deplatformization. In other words, the convergence of these phenomena did not merely result from platform decisions in isolation. External pressures, from advertisers, governments, and activist groups, shaped platform policies and their enforcement (Roberts, 2019). Moreover, as platforms expanded globally, they faced the daunting challenge of navigating diverse cultural, political, and social landscapes, each bringing its own set of expectations and frictions concerning exclusionary practices (Suzor, 2019). Thus, the evolution of deplatforming and deplatformization reflects a broader dialectic in platform studies, oscillating between the utopian ideals of the early internet and the intricate power dynamics of contemporary digital spaces.

"Deplatforming" as a concept refers to the act of banning or removing users from digital platforms, typically due to violations of community standards or for promoting hate speech, misinformation, or other harmful content. Deplatforming, while a distinct strategy, is inextricably intertwined with the broader discourse on content moderation within platform governance. The very act of deplatforming emerges from platforms' efforts to monitor, control, and sometimes restrict the content and users they host, thereby maintaining the integrity and safety of their digital realms (Gillespie, 2018). The spectrum of content moderation ranges from subtle interventions, like demotion of content in feeds or restricted visibility, to more pronounced actions such as deplatforming, which can encompass temporary suspensions or permanent bans (Roberts, 2019). Gillespie (2018) positions deplatforming within the broader discourse of content moderation in platform governance, highlighting the challenges platforms face in balancing free speech with the responsibility to maintain a safe and inclusive online environment. Through the lens of deplatforming, platforms are recognized as wielding immense power, capable of silencing voices and reshaping public discourse. Yet, as Marwick and Lewis (2017) argue, this also underscores the reactive nature of platforms, often resorting to deplatforming in response to public pressures or negative media attention. However, Marwick and Lewis (2017) suggest that deplatforming

can inadvertently amplify banned voices, granting them a "martyr" status in alternative digital spaces or wider media.

This intertwining of content moderation and deplatforming in a platform governance framework reveals the profound power dynamics at play. Platforms, in their pursuit to balance user freedom and platform safety, have been vested with the authority of intermediaries to determine who gets a voice in the digital ecosystem and under what conditions (Suzor, 2019). Gillespie (2018) underscores the intricate dilemma platforms grapple with: serving as private entities with immense influence over public discourse, their content moderation decisions—including deplatforming—bear heavy consequences for the democratic landscape. While deplatforming is widely seen as a necessary evil, instrumental in curbing digital malevolence like terrorism, violent extremism, and sexual exploitation, the delineation of these transgressions often treads into political terrains, raising questions about the objectivity of such decisions. Alarmingly, the power to define and determine these categories of infractions largely rests in the hands of corporate platform proprietors, turning their moderation policies into de facto arbiters of acceptable discourse, and hence, introducing another layer of intricacy to the politics of digital speech and censorship. Deplatforming, in essence, thus represents an apex of content moderation practices, underscoring the weight of boundary-setting in the digital realm. Through this lens, discussions on deplatforming become integral to the larger conversation about the values, responsibilities, and challenges intrinsic to platform governance and the politics of digital inclusivity and exclusivity.

“Deplatformization”, transcending the boundaries of individual platforms, is an increasingly recognized phenomenon that manifests systemically across entire platform ecosystems. This holistic viewpoint extends beyond the practices of a singular platform and instead evaluates how intertwined digital infrastructures collaborate, either intentionally or inadvertently, to sideline or suppress particular groups or content. While the essence of deplatforming often pertains to individual-centric measures, deplatformization studies explore a matrix of design choices, algorithmic biases, and overarching policies that collectively marginalize within and across platforms (Noble, 2018). When one platform initiates a specific policy or design choice, there can be a cascading effect where other platforms in the ecosystem

follow suit, leading to what can be described as 'chain reactions' of marginalization. This interconnectedness of digital ecosystems means that certain narratives or identities, once deplatformized on one major platform, can find themselves facing similar treatment across others.

One prominent example can be found in the synchronization of policies across major social media platforms. When an individual, community, or a piece of content is banned on one platform, other platforms often quickly follow with similar bans, effectively denying that individual, community, or content access to key digital infrastructures. This multi-platform deplatformization can sometimes occur not merely out of shared ethical stances but can be driven by governmental policy changes, economic considerations, fear of backlash, or a desire for uniformity in the digital landscape. Moreover, the cumulative effects of deplatformization across ecosystems can have dire consequences for marginalized communities. Noble's (2018) "Algorithms of Oppression" is seminal in elucidating how search algorithms, despite their veneer of neutrality, can perpetuate societal biases. Communities of color, LGBTQ+ groups, and other marginalized identities often encounter a systemic suppression of their narratives, not just on one platform, but across the digital expanse. Bucher (2018) provides insights into how platform design, spanning across ecosystems, can shape environments to favor specific interactions, content, and behaviors. While one platform's design might lead to the peripheries of certain content, when this design philosophy is adopted ecosystem-wide, the affected content or community faces an amplified marginalization. Deplatformization, in its expansive scope, therefore, underscores the intricate web of power dynamics in digital interactions. It necessitates an approach that not only scrutinizes individual platforms but also examines the collective impact of intertwined digital ecosystems on shaping digital culture and marginalities.

Importantly, the issue of algorithmic biases stands paramount in discussions on deplatformization. Noble's (2018) ground-breaking work, "Algorithms of Oppression", has highlighted how search algorithms, far from being neutral tools, can perpetuate and even amplify societal biases. For instance, communities of color, LGBTQ+ groups, or other marginalized identities often find their narratives either suppressed, misrepresented, or skewed in digital environments. Such systemic biases not

only suppress voices but also shape the collective understanding and perceptions of these communities in digital discourses. Furthermore, Bucher (2018) has probed into the subtleties of platform design and how seemingly benign choices can produce environments that prioritize particular kinds of interactions, content, and user behaviors. These design choices can lead to the sidelining of less commercially viable or 'desirable' content, subtly pushing them to the peripheries of digital visibility. But it is not just design or algorithmic decisions; sometimes, the very policies platforms institute, while well-intentioned, can inadvertently lead to deplatformization. Gillespie's (2018) examination of content moderation policies points to the unintended consequences of blanket content rules, where certain groups find themselves disproportionately affected due to the broad strokes of platform regulation.

The concept “deplatformization”, therefore, captures not only the discrete instances of removal or restriction but also the underpinning values, priorities, and ideological orientations that drive division in platform politics and governance, which may cause the marginalization or silencing of certain voices within the online ecosystem. Delving deeper into the governance structures of platforms, we can discern how deplatformization operates at various layers. Within the realm of the governance of platforms, external regulatory bodies, driven by political, socio-cultural, ideological, or economic motivations, can influence platforms to adopt measures that sideline or suppress specific voices, effectively manifesting deplatformization. Regulatory pressures, especially from dominant geopolitical entities, can sometimes coerce platforms into conforming to particular norms, thereby exacerbating the exclusionary practices (Bridy, 2018). Furthermore, app stores, which serve as gateways to a multitude of digital platforms, wield a formidable power in this deplatformization dynamic. By deciding which applications find space in their repositories, they too can act as arbiters of visibility, potentially sidelining certain platforms and thereby controlling users' access to diverse digital experiences (Hespress, 2013). These app stores not only curate their offerings but also impose their own policies and regulations, leading many platforms to tailor their operations and content in ways that align with app store requirements, essentially bending to their will to gain or maintain visibility.

Returning back to the internal dynamics discussed regarding governance by platforms, it becomes evident that the processes of deplatformization are not arbitrary but influenced by a confluence of factors. First and foremost, platforms are inherently sensitive to external pressures, particularly those from advertisers and investors. Their commercial sustainability often hinges on advertiser contentment, which may dictate a suppression of controversial or 'non-brand-safe' content (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Furthermore, platforms might engage in deplatformization to pre-empt or respond to potential regulatory scrutiny, adjusting their policies and practices to align with prevailing legal and socio-cultural climates (Gorwa, 2019). Public relations concerns also play a pivotal role; platforms might opt to deplatform contentious figures or content to maintain a positive public image and avert potential backlashes (Suzor, 2019). Additionally, platforms, being transnational entities, have to constantly juggle varying sociocultural norms across regions, leading to deplatformization in certain geographies to respect local sensibilities (Gillespie, 2018). In essence, while platforms self-govern, they do so in a reactive mode, perpetually calibrating their strategies in response to a complex web of economic, regulatory, socio-cultural, and public perception pressures, making deplatformization a dynamic and evolving practice in the digital realm.

Expanding the lens to governance on platforms further accentuates the multifaceted and deeply interwoven nature of deplatformization processes. Central to this dimension is the active role played by user and user-communities, who, through their collective actions, can serve both as arbiters and victims of deplatformization. The architecture of platforms, in many ways, empowers users by offering tools such as reporting mechanisms, upvoting/downvoting, and community-driven moderation (Crawford & Gillespie, 2016). However, these tools can also be co-opted for strategic purposes. Orchestrated campaigns, often termed as 'brigading', can weaponize these tools to sideline or mute voices that dissent or challenge prevailing group ideologies (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Simultaneously, the grassroots level also witnesses a myriad of counteractions against deplatformization. There has been a notable surge in communities forming to actively resist such efforts, either by creating supportive networks, providing visibility to marginalized voices, or devising strategies to counter mass reporting (Milan, 2015).

Furthermore, platforms occasionally witness internal user protests and campaigns against perceived heavy-handed moderation or arbitrary content take-downs (Molldrem, 2018). Such activism underscores the continuous tug-of-war between agency and structure on digital platforms, reinforcing the notion that while platforms provide the stage, it is the users who significantly shape the performance (Baym, 2015). In essence, the lens of governance on platforms' reveals a dynamic battleground where power, agency, and politics are perpetually in flux, with deplatformization being both a tool and a challenge in these digital skirmishes.

Deplatforming and deplatformization, as pervasive forces, are woven into the very fabric of platform governance, spanning across external regulations, platform-imposed policies, and user-driven dynamics. In the intricate dance of power between digital platforms and their users, the act of deplatforming or systemic deplatformization is not met with passive acquiescence. Users, equipped with a nuanced understanding of their digital environment and often propelled by a sense of communal solidarity, frequently deploy strategies to resist, adapt, or challenge these exclusionary practices. Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández (2016) delineate a series of user-driven responses that emerge in the aftermath of deplatforming actions, ranging from creating alternative identities or "backup" accounts to mobilizing collective dissent against perceived injustices. In some cases, the sheer scale of user resistance compels platforms to revisit and amend their decisions, underscoring the dialectical nature of platform-user negotiations.

Furthermore, beyond individual acts of deplatforming, the broader narrative of deplatformization has spurred a user exodus to alternative platforms, seeking spaces where their voices and values find resonance. This migration trend, articulated by Gillespie (2018), illustrates the search for digital refuges that offer a perceived sense of free expression or community alignment. Parler, Mastodon, and Gab, for instance, have emerged as alternatives in the wake of widespread deplatformization sentiments on mainstream platforms. However, these migrations also engender new challenges, often concentrating like-minded individuals and potentially amplifying echo chambers (Marwick, 2013). Simultaneously, there is a burgeoning trend of users carving out innovative digital enclaves within mainstream platforms,

exploiting platform affordances in unforeseen ways to craft spaces resilient to deplatformization (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). These "subaltern counterpublics", as described by Fraser (1990) and Nelson (2019), create protective ecosystems, harnessing platform tools to both defend against potential threats and to proactively shape discursive norms that resist mainstream platform ideologies. Through these myriad strategies, users assert their agency, illustrating that the platformed digital landscape is not a unilateral domain of power, but rather a contested terrain where power dynamics are perpetually negotiated and redefined.

The rise of deplatforming as an operative modality introduces a new layer of intricacies to the governance of digital platforms. Deplatforming, in its essence, operates at the intersection of platform governance and politics. Gillespie (2018) has argued that the decisions to deplatform, be they algorithmic or human-driven, are inherently tied to a platform's commercial, ideological, and regulatory imperatives. Such decisions, while often framed as neutral acts of community regulation, are deeply political, entangled with larger debates about freedom of speech, digital rights, and platform neutrality. However, the complexities do not end with the act of deplatforming itself. Platforms find themselves navigating a turbulent sea of legal, ethical, and public relations challenges. For instance, deplatforming decisions can sometimes backfire, leading to claims of censorship or bias, thereby reinforcing already existing critiques of platforms as monolithic gatekeepers of digital discourse (Noble, 2018). These reactions sometimes push platforms into a reactionary stance, where they are constantly adapting their policies in response to external pressures, leading to a cycle of persistent controversy and revision (Roose, 2019). Moreover, the global nature of platforms introduces jurisdictional challenges. What is deemed acceptable, or offensive, varies across cultures and legal systems, and platforms, in their bid to scale globally, must grapple with these variations (Suzor, 2019).

Consequently, platforms are left walking a tightrope, trying to maintain a consistent governance strategy while also adapting to regional nuances, all while under the watchful eye of a global user base and regulatory bodies. Within this convoluted landscape, deplatforming becomes more than just an operational tool; it emerges as a litmus test, revealing platforms' priorities, their interpretations of

responsibility, and their perceptions of user agency and rights. As platforms continue to evolve and as digital culture becomes even more enmeshed in our sociopolitical fabric, the discourse around exclusion and erasure from deplatforming and deplatformization, governance, and the inherent power dynamics will undoubtedly intensify, necessitating a continuous academic engagement with these themes. As articulated by scholars like Gillespie (2018) and Noble (2018), these processes represent a microcosm of broader societal tensions, embodying the perpetual negotiations between platform authority and user agency. While much of the discourse has predominantly revolved around theoretical framings and high-profile instances of deplatforming, a palpable gap remains in understanding the lived realities of deplatformed individuals and communities. Noble's (2018) exploration into algorithmic biases, for instance, underscores the systemic marginalization inherent in platform design and decision-making, yet what remains under-examined are the granular experiences of those at the receiving end of such marginalization.

The myriad shades of deplatformization, especially in the realms of sexual content and sex-based communities, beckon a more nuanced, empirical lens—one that unravels the intricacies of platform politics and governance from the vantage point of affected users. Such a perspective is not merely academic but carries profound sociopolitical implications, providing a window into the often-overshadowed narratives of those negotiating their identities and practices amidst platform-driven exclusions. Recognizing this lacuna in the literature, this dissertation endeavors to fill this void. By centering on a specific socio-economic location, it seeks to probe deep into the intersections of deplatformization with sexual content, communities, and practices. Through this focused lens, the research aims to chart the contours of platform politics and governance as experienced, resisted, and navigated by these individuals and communities, adding a rich, empirical dimension to the broader discourse on platform exclusions.

2.7. Conclusion

In conclusion, in the rapidly evolving landscape of digital platforms, our understanding of platform politics, power dynamics, and governance has broadened, yet remains contested in its depth and granularity. Scholars such as Gillespie (2018), Bucher (2018), and Marwick (2013) have continually highlighted the intricate interplay of platform affordances, algorithms, and user agency, painting a complex picture of the socio-digital world we navigate. As this literature review has dissected, deplatforming and deplatformization emerge as contentious strategies in this panorama, revealing the stark power differentials and political manoeuvrings inherent in platform operations.

The decision to deplatform and deplatformize, especially in the realm of sex and sexuality, carries with it a multitude of sociocultural, political, and economic implications. Historically, sexual cultures have been at the forefront of both liberation movements and societal stigmatization. The digital realm, in many ways, amplifies age-old debates surrounding sexuality, its representation, and its acceptability within mainstream contexts (Langlois & Slane, 2017). Scholars such as Paasonen (2018) have highlighted how digital platforms, while promising open spaces for diverse expressions, often reinforce societal norms and stigmas, particularly around sexuality. The digital age, with scholars like Paasonen (2018), Cobbe (2021) and Velkova & Kaun (2021) leading the discourse, reflects a continuation of these trends, where platforms become sites of contestation. Sexual communities, especially those marginalized, find themselves precariously positioned, at once harnessing the power of digital connectivity and battling against digital erasure, exclusion, and marginalization.

The intersection of platform studies and digital sex culture studies thus reveals a landscape fraught with contradictions. On one hand, there's a celebration of the democratising potential of platforms, promising a voice to the marginalized (Attwood, 2006). On the other, there is a tangible policing of boundaries, often at the expense of these very communities, reflecting larger societal mores and biases (Gillespie, 2018). To comprehend this phenomena's full spectrum, it is essential to engage empirically with those at its epicenter—individuals and communities navigating the ambiguities of sexual expression in the digital age, especially within specific socio-economic contexts. This dissertation is rooted in this

exploration. By focusing on the deplatforming and deplatformization of sex, especially within a distinct socio-economic backdrop, it seeks to illuminate the nuanced experiences of those implicated in the platform politics and governance surrounding sexual content, communities, and practices. Through this lens, it aims to offer a rich, layered understanding of digital desires, their expressions, suppressions, and the platforms that mediate them.

As platforms continue to dominate our digital existence, the ongoing tensions around deplatforming and deplatformization of sex present more than just technological debates—they touch upon core societal values, rights to expression, and the digital embodiment of human experiences. It is thus imperative, in this complex web of digital interactions, to focus on those most affected, to trace the lived experiences of those navigating the gray areas of platform politics around sex and sexuality. This dissertation, positioned at this critical juncture, seeks to research these under-explored terrains. By focusing on a specific socio-economic location, it attempts to unravel the intricate ways in which individuals and communities, particularly those associated with sexual content, sex-based communities, and diverse sexual practices, are implicated in the larger discourse of platform politics and governance.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework: Sexual Context Collapse in Platform Politics and Governance

The confluence of power, politics, and governance in the digital realm creates a complex tapestry that demands in-depth critical examination (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Gillespie, 2014). As interactions on digital platforms intertwine with socio-cultural constructs, there emerges a pressing need to navigate through the profound constructs of embodied performance, governmentalities, biopower, and context collapse. This chapter seeks to unpack these concepts, offering a lens to decipher the intricate dynamics of platform politics and governance.

Embodied performance has become instrumental in comprehending how users, notably content creators, channel their lived experiences, identities, and expressions within the digital sphere. On platforms like TikTok, presenting one's sexuality extends beyond mere content creation, evolving into a declaration of identity and defiance. The landscape is further complicated as platform algorithms, policies, and audiences hold the potential to shape these digital performances. Intricately woven into this narrative are Foucault's (1991) notions of governmentalities and biopower, offering insights into the nuanced ways platforms exert influence over not just the content, but the very essence of users—their bodies, identities, and agency. Acts of deplatforming and deplatformization, especially concerning sexuality, can be perceived as biopolitical actions, with platforms arbitrating over acceptable sexual expressions.

Furthermore, the concept of context collapse, introduced by Marwick & boyd (2011), gains fresh relevance in this discourse. Initially recognized for capturing the convergence of multiple social contexts in digital media, its implications grow profound when examined in the realm of platform politics, governance, and particularly, the moderation of sexual content. Platforms' tendencies to streamline multifaceted sexual expressions into broad, often misguided categories leads to what can be termed as 'sexual context collapse'. It underscores the trials faced by creators striving to portray layered sexual

narratives in a digital milieu that frequently relegates them to simplistic classifications—whether they are deemed acceptable or not, educational or explicit, artistic or obscene, and so on.

3.1. Embodied Performances, Governmentalities, and Context Collapse in Platform Governance

The theoretical framework for sexual context collapse in platform politics and governance seeks to conjoin the previously discussed concepts into a cohesive analytical structure. This framework foregrounds the embodied performance as an active site where content creators, through their digital renditions of sexuality, challenge or conform to platform structures, effectively shaping the politics and governance on platforms like TikTok. Crucially, governmentalities and biopower intersect with these performances, manifesting as the inherent power structures embedded within platforms that either enable or inhibit these expressions. Such governance mechanisms, drawing upon Foucauldian paradigms, elucidate the overarching power dynamics where platforms dictate the contours of 'acceptable' sexual representation. Inevitably, this power play results in a 'sexual context collapse,' an adaptation of Marwick & boyd's (2011) context collapse. Here, the rich tapestry of sexual narratives, instead of being recognized for their diverse significance, are funneled into reductionist categories by platform algorithms and policies. The importance of this framework lies in its ability to critically navigate the spaces between sexual content creators' agency and platform constraints, elucidating the political, cultural, and social intricacies of digital sexual culture.

By weaving these theories together within the fabric of platform politics and governance, and with respect to user agency, the chapter will propose the conception of a "sexual context collapse". This theoretical lens seeks to illuminate the nuanced interplays between sexual content creators, their myriad audiences, and the platforms that both empower and constrain them. Through this reframing, the dissertation aspires to create a bridge, merging academic theorizations with the raw, lived realities of creators, and laying a robust foundation for the ensuing empirical journey.

3.1.a. Embodied Performances and Identity

In the realm of digital platforms, the act of content creation, particularly of sexual content, is not merely a process of uploading and sharing, but a complex choreography of presentation, representation, and embodied performance. Platforms have transformed from mere sharing spaces to stages for performative acts. Just as performance in the theatrical sense necessitates conscious decisions about attire, demeanor, and expression, creating content on social media demands similar cognizance. Every post, image, or video entail decisions about aesthetics, narrative, context, and persona. Each choice becomes a deliberate act of performing a certain identity to an audience — followers, subscribers, or any user that comes across the content.

The stakes are heightened when this performance revolves around sexual content. In such scenarios, creators do not just share a static image or video; they curate a version of their sexuality that they wish to project. This performance is layered with societal expectations, personal experiences, and the boundaries set by platform guidelines. These creators often navigate the precarious balance of authenticity and audience expectations, challenging or conforming to societal norms of sexuality. Every angle, caption, and reaction reflect an ongoing negotiation between personal sexual agency and external parameters. Furthermore, the audience's feedback in the form of likes, comments, and shares creates a loop, impacting subsequent performances (Reagle, 2015). Just as a theater performer might adjust to audience reactions, a content creator might modify their performance based on the digital applause or critique they receive. In this digital age, the line between performer and audience blurs, making content creation a collaborative, dynamic, and highly performative act, especially in the realm of sexual content.

Judith Butler has long contended the performative aspects of gender identity, grounded in her seminal argument that gender is not something one is, but something one does – a series of continuous performances enacted and re-enacted in the context of societal norms and structures (Butler, 1990; 1993; 1997). Building upon this, the act of presenting one's sexual identity or expressions on platforms like TikTok becomes an ongoing negotiation between personal agency and societal, as well as platform-imposed, expectations. This embodiment of performance in the digital realm raises questions about the

politics of the body. Specifically, because bodies, as sites of both self-expression and regulation, occupy a precarious space on platforms. They are all at once vehicles for individual articulation and objects and subjects of platform politics and governance. This duality means that while users harness their bodies as tools for personal narratives and self-assertion, these same bodies become the battlegrounds for larger discourses around censorship, morality, and power dynamics on platforms. Consequently, the body's presence on digital platforms is not merely representational but deeply entangled in ongoing negotiations of identity, autonomy, and systemic control. Therefore, the politics of visibility and representation intersect with these performances, especially when it comes to marginalized bodies, non-normative sexualities, and diverse gender expressions (Daniels, 2009; Nakamura, 2008). As platforms increasingly become arbiters of acceptable content, they inadvertently set the stage for what kinds of bodies and sexual expressions are deemed 'acceptable' and which are 'deviant' or 'controversial'.

Sexual digital culture studies amplify these considerations by elucidating the myriad ways platforms can be sites of empowerment and disenfranchisement simultaneously (Paasonen, 2011; Albury & Crawford, 2012). On one hand, platforms allow for the democratization of sexual narratives, offering spaces for individuals to reclaim and assert their sexual identities and experiences (Albury, 2015). Yet, on the other, they are also arenas of contention where dominant norms often overshadow or even erase minority expressions (Langlois & Slane, 2017). The content creators, in their bid to navigate this intricate web of norms and regulations, constantly calibrate their performances. They strategically toe the line between personal authenticity and platform acceptability, showcasing the intricate dance between the self and the system (Senft, 2008). It is within this dance that the true politics of the body on digital platforms is unveiled, a dance that, at its core, reflects larger societal negotiations around sexuality, acceptability, and power.

The academic field of performance studies, an interdisciplinary domain intersecting with anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies, also foregrounds the body as pivotal in social interaction and expression. Schechner (2002), a central figure in the discourse, offers a view of performance, spanning from daily life activities to artistic expressions. By emphasizing the body as a mediator in these

performances, he underscores its active role in shaping and communicating meaning. Erving Goffman's work (1956) enhances this perspective, when taken together, by using theatrical metaphors to unpack social interactions. His conceptualization of the 'front stage' and 'backstage' highlights the duality in individual performances, depending on their audience. On the 'front stage', individuals adhere to societal norms, whereas the 'backstage' provides a sanctuary from external expectations. This dualism emphasizes a dialectic relationship between the performer and the audience, with the audience's perception having the potential to influence the performer's embodied actions. Goffman's dramaturgical approach finds resonance with Butler's theory of performativity, which underscores the constructed nature of identities, continually influenced by societal interactions (Butler, 1990). Such performances are not stagnant; they evolve through continuous interactions where individuals "wear" roles and adjust to the ongoing process of identity construction.

Another transformative contribution to this discussion emerges from Fischer-Lichte's theory of the 'autopoietic feedback loop' (2008). She posits performances as dynamic and self-organizing. Rather than viewing audiences as mere passive receivers, Fischer-Lichte positions them as co-creators of identity. This dynamism elucidates the reciprocal nature of performance, with performers and audiences in a ceaseless loop of mutual influence. Goffman's and Fischer-Lichte's frameworks dovetail in emphasizing the audience's pivotal role in embodied performances. While Goffman showcases the co-construction of social reality, Fischer-Lichte underscores the performance as an emergent outcome of complex interactions. The foundational perspectives from these scholars on embodied performances underscore the fluidity of identity and the consequential role of societal constructs. It becomes evident that performances are not mere reflections of self but are moulded by the physical, situational, and social facets of an individual's environment.

No discourse on embodied performance is complete, however, without considering the feminist interventions, which critically examine the performance and perception of gendered bodies, challenging the conventions of identity as static (Butler, 1990). Feminist scholarship, as Butler (1990) postulates, provides a pivotal challenge to traditional understandings of identity. Instead of viewing identity as an

immutable essence, Butler suggests that it is constructed through continual performances, particularly in the realm of gender. The body, in this light, isn't a passive entity but is instead an active site of negotiation, resistance, and construction. This reframing of identity and embodiment rejects the conventional, challenging the deep-seated dichotomies of object/subject and passive/active.

Grosz's "Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism" (1994) pushes the envelope further. Grosz's theory is particularly salient because it marries the political with the personal. In her dissection of the body's role in the negotiation of gendered and sexual identities, she brings to the fore the idea of "corporeal embodiment." This concept refutes the traditional Cartesian division of the body and mind, emphasizing their mutual entanglement. As such, identities are never merely "given" but are always in the making, in a constant state of flux influenced by both internal perceptions and external impositions. This dialogic construction of identity, as articulated by both Grosz and Butler, is further enriched by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological insights in "Phenomenology of Perception" (1945), which portrays the body as inseparable from our perceptual engagement with the world. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is not just an instrument but a vital part of our subjective experience. When mapped onto the discussions by Butler and Grosz, one can see a confluence of ideas: the body is simultaneously a canvas of societal inscriptions, an active agent in identity negotiation, and a fundamental facet of our existential experience. These foundational ideas are crucial when extrapolated to the digital domain, especially in the age of pervasive platform politics and governance. Johnson's examination in "Appropriating Blackness" (2003) serves as a testament to the applicability of Butler's ideas outside the confines of gender. By deconstructing racial performances, Johnson reveals how the embodiment of identities can act as a site of resistance, highlighting the performative nature of "blackness" and how it can challenge or subvert dominant narratives.

Further dialogues on digital embodied performances are present in Papacharissi's (2011) work. In Papacharissi's (2011) pivotal examination of digital embodiment, the relationship between the body and its representation in online domains comes to the forefront. Rooting her analysis in the foundational ideas of Grosz, Butler, and Merleau-Ponty, she underscores the crucial continuity between real-world embodied

performances and their digital translations. The physical body, for all its tangible limitations, extends and manifests in the online sphere, carrying with it the weight of lived experiences, societal impositions, and individual agency. Digital platforms, as Papacharissi expounds, become more than mere passive conduits for these performances. Instead, they serve as potent amplifiers. The mere act of logging onto a social platform, for example, doesn't merely reproduce our offline identities; it magnifies, distorts, refines, and sometimes even redefines them. This process becomes particularly salient in performances imbued with sexual context, as they intersect with deeply entrenched societal norms, biases, and power dynamics. In online spaces, where the freedom to craft one's identity is seemingly boundless, these performances can become sites of empowerment, but also surveillance, discipline, and control.

Senft's (2008) in-depth exploration of 'camgirls' – women who broadcast themselves via webcams on various platforms – illuminates the multifaceted dimensions of online embodied performances, particularly those steeped in sexuality. The 'camgirl' culture, rooted in both self-expression and the male gaze, navigates a complex terrain of empowerment and exploitation. While some may see it as an act of reclaiming one's agency over their own body, monetizing their performances, and challenging normative standards of femininity, others critique it for perpetuating a commodification of the female body. This duality becomes even more pronounced in the context of platform politics and governance. Digital platforms, while granting 'camgirls' and other online performers the space to exist and operate, also wield significant power in dictating the boundaries of acceptable content. The nebulous guidelines on sexual content, often steeped in societal mores, result in inconsistent policing. As Senft poignantly underscores, platforms act simultaneously as gateways and gatekeepers. They can amplify the voices of marginalized communities, providing them with the agency to define their identities. Yet, they can also marginalize, censor, or exploit these very performances under the guise of content guidelines and community standards.

In essence, the body in digital performance is a nexus of multiple forces: individual agency, societal norms, platform politics, and digital governance. Platforms, like TikTok, are both theaters and regulators of embodied performance, presenting a dual role that accentuates the complexities of body

politics in the digital age. Drawing from seminal works on embodiment and the intertwined nature of online-offline identities, it is evident that TikTok is not merely a passive conduit but a potent amplifier and modulator of how bodies, especially those presenting sexual content, are showcased, received, and governed. The act of deplatforming—or the removal of content or users—becomes an exercise in power, influenced by both broader societal norms and specific platform politics. The contentious act of deplatformization of sex on TikTok underlines a critical tension: while platforms enable expressions of identity and sexuality, challenging normative conventions, they simultaneously wield power in dictating boundaries, often rooted in opaque guidelines and selective enforcement. This duality raises pertinent questions about agency, censorship, and the digital governance of embodied performances, particularly as they intersect with sexual representation and platform regulations.

3.1.b. Governmentalities and Biopower

Having considered embodied performance and body politics, it hopefully becomes apparent that our comprehension of the self, identity, and the very body that performs on these platforms is intertwined with systems of control and governance. The very acts of presenting, performing, and negotiating identities on digital platforms are embedded in larger structures that mediate these actions. Foucault's concepts of governmentality and biopower provide the theoretical scaffolding to understand these structures. Just as embodied performance reveals the intricate interplay of self-representation, agency, and societal norms, governmentality and biopower further nuance our understanding by laying bare the mechanisms through which platforms exert influence and control. It is not merely about how individuals or communities choose to perform or represent, but equally about how these platforms, through their architectures and algorithms, shape, guide, or even constrain such performances. In this landscape, the politics of the body is not just about autonomy but also about navigating the structures of digital power that actively orchestrate the realms within which these bodies operate.

Therefore, understanding embodied performances within these platforms becomes increasingly important to explore and interpret user experiences and identities, and how these performances, in turn,

are shaped and influenced by the structures and dynamics of power that pervade these platforms. This is where the concepts "governmentalities" and “biopower” introduced by Michel Foucault, provides a powerful lens to further examine these interactions. Governmentality, at its core, digs into the conduct of conduct, or how authorities (in this case, platforms) orchestrate modes of control, directing both themselves and their constituents. As we know, platforms are not merely neutral intermediaries; they actively "govern" the digital landscape, establishing rules, norms, and protocols, especially around content deemed sensitive or controversial (Lobato, 2016; Gillespie, 2010). TikTok, for instance, as a global platform, constantly negotiates its content policies to cater to a diverse set of cultural, political, governmental, and social expectations, which inevitably impacts how sexual content is framed, promoted, or suppressed on the platform (Brennan, 2018).

Biopower offers an even more intricate layer to this discourse. For Foucault, biopower encapsulates strategies employed to manage populations, their behaviors, and even their very bodies. In the digital realm, this translates to how platforms survey, categorize, and regulate users and their content (Van Dijck, 2013). Sexual content, by its very nature, is intimately tied to the body – to desires, performances, and identities. Thus, platforms, in their attempt to harness and manage this form of biopower, deploy algorithms and policies that monitor and sometimes police sexual expressions, productions, and consumptions (Paasonen, 2018). What is seen as a harmless expression in one culture or community might be flagged or suppressed in another, revealing the multiple layers and intricacies of biopolitical governance in operation(Wang, 2019).

Biopower and governmentality are foundational concepts introduced by Foucault, each underscoring distinct dimensions of power and its operations. Originating from his lectures at the Collège de France, Foucault's conception of governmentality dissects the strategies, tactics, and mechanisms underpinning societal governance. It moves beyond mere formal political structures to encompass the intricate, pervasive webs of power permeating everyday life. Parallelly, biopower, as conceptualized by Foucault, emphasizes power's exertion over biological life—manifested in surveillance, disciplinary techniques, and population management aimed at optimizing productivity and establishing social control.

Rather than viewing power purely as a constraining force, Foucault's insights unveil its dual role: as both a producer and a limiter of actions. His seminal work, "Security, Territory, Population" (1977), further unpacks governmentality, suggesting its reach is not confined solely to state governance. It intricately spans across various entities, from collective communities to individual selves. This analytical shift has galvanized scholars, prompting deeper explorations into the multifaceted workings of power across practices, institutions, and discourses.

The realm of governmentality, as delineated by Foucault, has witnessed significant amplification and application through contributions by scholars, such as Rose et al., (1999), Dean (1999), and Miller (2008). In "Powers of Freedom" (1999), Rose elucidates the nuanced systems of governance in modern societies through a lens of autonomy; delving into how modern societies govern through seemingly liberating paradigms: freedom and autonomy. He introduces "advanced liberal governmentality," highlighting governance not as an overt act of coercion, but rather as a subtle orchestration that guides and curates the autonomous decisions of individuals. Far from being overtly coercive, this style of governance subtly shapes the desires, choices, and actions of individuals. In essence, Rose nuances the Foucauldian perspective, suggesting that the very act of granting freedom, such as the freedom to choose, is in itself a mode of governance. This insight resonates strongly when juxtaposed with the discourse surrounding embodied performances on social media. The purported autonomy granted to content creators, especially those dealing with sexual content, is limited by the very platforms that assert to champion their freedom, subtly guiding, limiting, or even negating their choices. Content creators—especially those producing or engaging with sexual content—are both governed and given the freedom to self-express, but within bounds defined by platform algorithms and community standards.

Further enriching this dialogue, Rose, O'Malley, and Valverde's "Governmentality" (2009) underscores the symbiotic relationship between governance forms and knowledge infrastructures. They position power as a dual actor: it not only governs through formal laws but thrives through the production and deployment of knowledge. Knowledge then, from this perspective, becomes a vital cog in the wheel of power – produced, circulated, and applied. Their work underscores how specific forms of expertise

and knowledge underpin and legitimize different governmental regimes. In this analytical context, power transcends mere legal frameworks, interweaving itself with the generation and dissemination of knowledge. This becomes particularly salient in the context of exclusion and deplatforming in digital spaces. The erasure or marginalization of sexual content creators can be discerned as a manifestation of such power dynamics, where authoritative knowledge structures decide what is deemed 'acceptable' or 'normative' and who can create and disseminate knowledge.

Miller and Rose's collaboration (2008) synthesizes these discussions, delving into the practical implications of governmentality. Their investigation into the nexus between self-governance and governing others accentuates the reflexive essence of power –by emphasizing the dual role individuals play, as both subjects to be governed and as active participants in governance. They, therefore, unravel the dual position of modern individuals as both subjects to, and agents of, governance. This reflexive relationship between self-governance and societal power dynamics encapsulates the dialectic faced by sexual content creators: while they attempt to carve spaces for self-expression, they simultaneously grapple with external constraints and internalized norms. As creators conform to platform norms, they also reflexively reshape those very norms, influencing platform governance.

Finally, Dean's (1999) analysis dovetails seamlessly with Foucault's conceptualization of 'capillary power' and 'power/knowledge'. For Foucault, 'capillary power' does not denote power that is solely concentrated at hierarchical peaks. Instead, it permeates deeper, flowing throughout society much like capillaries in our bodies, reaching even the minutest aspects of everyday life. It is distributed, diffused, and more omnipresent than just being top-down. On the other hand, Foucault's idea of 'power/knowledge' posits that power and knowledge are inextricably linked. Power produces knowledge, and this knowledge, in turn, reinforces and reproduces power structures. They are intertwined to the extent that one can't be conceptualized without the other. Drawing on these Foucauldian concepts, Dean expands the view, emphasizing the decentralized, dispersed nature of power. He elucidates the mechanisms that make power both an oppressive and a productive force. By asserting that power does more than just repress – it constructs, shapes, and defines – Dean (1999) strengthens the notion that power

is constitutive. It creates subjects, identities, and realities. Within the digital realm, particularly in the context of embodied performance and body politics, this expanded view offers profound insights. When content creators present their identities or engage in embodied performances on platforms, they do so within a milieu shaped by this constitutive power. Their expressions, shaped and sometimes limited by platform norms and algorithms, are a direct manifestation of this power/knowledge dynamic. Thus, understanding Dean's interpretation, rooted in Foucauldian principles, equips us to better grasp the nuances of embodied performances and the politics of representation on digital platforms.

In understanding digital platforms through the lens of governmentality, the intricate governance structures that underpin them become more lucid. Such a lens unveils the power dynamics, regulatory mechanisms, and systems of control that drive social media platforms. Notably, van Dijck's (2013) critical history of social media culture offers a pivotal interpretation. Using Foucault's governmentality as a foundation, van Dijck extrapolates how digital platforms, far from being neutral, deploy nuanced strategies of control and surveillance. She doesn't merely present surface observations; instead, she investigates power relations and socio-technical architectures that constitute platform governance. This meticulous exploration of algorithms, design features, and technological structures demonstrates how platforms guide user behaviours, content dissemination, and interactions. Through this discourse, van Dijck accentuates the diverse and often understated methods through which platforms exert power, molding user experiences and actions.

Similarly, Cobbe's (2021) scrutiny of the nexus between algorithmic power and governmentality enriches this discourse. Her work employs a Foucauldian approach to decode algorithmic power in censorship on these platforms. Cobbe delineates a model of surveillance governmentality, spotlighting the centrality of algorithms in supervising, and sometimes curtailing, information and communications. For Cobbe, the algorithm is not merely a neutral entity; it is an embodiment of surveillance-driven governmentality. Platforms, through algorithms, do not just oversee; they exert a commercially oriented control, tailoring content visibility in alignment with commercial objectives. Cobbe's fusion of algorithmic paradigms with Foucauldian governmentality illuminates the unseen tendrils of control that

platforms exercise, modulating digital discourses and user behaviors. Beyond mere control, her analysis underscores the commercial imperatives driving algorithmic censorship. Drawing from Cobbe's insights, we discern how platforms, beyond mere venues of interaction, become active regulators of discourse, channeling user behaviors and digital dialogues.

Linking back to our overarching theme, when one intertwines the concept of embodied performances with governmentality, a crucial theoretical nexus emerges, particularly apt for this dissertation. Embodied performances are not just digital enactments; they are manifestations of both the performative self and the governing dynamics of the platforms. As sites of expression, platforms are also arenas of governance where algorithms, community norms, and user behaviors sculpt the contours of these digital enactments. Yet, while the confluence of embodied performances and governmentality is significant, it appears under-explored in the context of creating and negotiating sexual content on these platforms. This gap calls for empirical exploration, given the interplay of body politics and platform dynamics.

3.2. Sexual Context Collapse in Platform Politics and Governance

The twin frameworks of embodied performance and governmentalities can be important conceptual anchors for understanding platform politics and governance. Embodied performance, a concept that emphasizes the centrality of the body in social interactions, challenges us to think about digital platforms not merely as neutral conduits for communication but as arenas wherein individual and collective identities are performed, contested, and reshaped. This lens acknowledges the fluid, dynamic, and often contested nature of identity and representation in the digital realm. Parallelly, the theory of governmentalities, deeply rooted in Foucauldian discourse, provides a nuanced lens to dissect the intricate dynamics of power, regulation, and control within digital platforms. Drawing upon notions of power that's capillary in nature and the interplay of power and knowledge, governmentalities spotlight the sophisticated strategies platforms employ to govern – from overt community guidelines to subtler algorithmic interventions. Rather than envisioning power as a top-down imposition, this perspective

understands governance as dispersed across myriad channels, mechanisms, and actors. This regulatory dimension, far from being purely technical, is deeply embedded in the socio-political fabric, with platforms acting as both mirrors reflecting societal norms and prisms refracting and shaping those norms.

Together, these frameworks offer a composite theoretical lens, allowing for a more encompassing comprehension of the politics and governance of digital platforms. They underscore the push and pull between individual agency and systemic control, between the expressive desires of users and the regulating tendencies of platforms. As this discourse has evolved, the interplay between embodied performance and governmentalities becomes evident: platforms are not just sites of expression but also of regulation, shaping and being shaped by the myriad performances they host. In synthesizing these frameworks, a complex tapestry emerges. Digital platforms become stages where embodied performances play out, but the script, stage design, and even audience reactions are subtly influenced, if not directed, by platform governmentalities. It is in this intricate nexus of performance and governance that the stage is set for a deeper exploration, leading us towards the novel concept of "sexual context collapse."

Sexual context collapse, at its core, is a nuanced evolution of the foundational concept of “context collapse” (boyd', 2002; 2008; 2010), recalibrated to situate it within the distinctive intersection of platform politics, governance, and user-agency. Its conceptual inception arises from the exigent need to articulate the tensions and dynamics particular to content creators or platform users who navigate the realms of sexual content within digital platforms. The landscape of digital platforms, intrinsically governed by algorithms, community standards, and user behaviors, inherently defines the contours within which content is created, shared, and consumed. However, when considering sexual content, these contours become more convoluted. Sexual context collapse seeks to unravel this convolution by focusing on the complex interplay between content creators or platform users and the platforms themselves.

Through the process of deconstruction, one can extract the inherent significations embedded in the concept. "Sexual content" underscores a category of digital content that, while diverse in its manifestations, coherently centers around expressions of sexuality, sensuality, and related themes. Meanwhile, "collapse" denotes a confluence, a convergence, and at times, a tension—indicating instances

where boundaries blur, meanings overlap, or traditional categories meld into one another. In the framework of sexual context collapse, the "collapse" is not just a mere blending of contexts as traditionally understood, but a heightened state of vulnerability and volatility for sexual content creators. This is where content boundaries, platform policies, user expectations, and societal norms converge, often creating a fraught digital ecosystem. This ecosystem then becomes the stage where content creators, particularly those engaged in the realm of sexual expression, find themselves grappling with multifaceted challenges. These challenges range from negotiating their content vis-a-vis platform algorithms to confronting instances of deplatforming, marginalization, or even outright erasure. Sexual context collapse, therefore, serves as a theoretical lens that illuminates the labyrinthine intricacies faced by creators of sexual content. It articulates the push and pull between autonomy and regulation, between self-expression and platform constraints, ultimately providing a more refined understanding of how sexual content, and in turn its creators, navigate social media platforms and how platforms respond, regulate, and often reshape it.

Coined by Michael Wesch (2009) and later expanded by Alice Marwick and dana boyd, "context collapse" describes a phenomenon in digital environments wherein diverse social contexts, each with their unique norms and expectations, amalgamate into a single, undifferentiated context due to the nature of online platforms. This merging of disparate social contexts and audiences can result in a complex, often disorienting environment where individuals must carefully navigate their self-presentation, performance, and interaction. Consequently, "context collapse" captures the tension of presenting different facets of one's identity, usually segregated in different social contexts, to a broad, heterogeneous audience simultaneously in digital spaces. This tension amplifies when navigating multiple audience expectations in one space, akin to performing on a stage for varied spectators simultaneously. Therefore, the primary challenge lies in concurrently negotiating divergent social contexts and norms, particularly when the expectations of one context contradict those of others.

The phenomenon of context collapse is particularly significant when considering sexual content on social media. For example, a content creator sharing sex education materials on a platform like TikTok

must simultaneously cater to an array of potential audiences including younger viewers seeking information, older viewers with potentially more conservative views on sexuality, peers, colleagues, potential employers, and perhaps even family members. These diverse audiences, each with their distinct expectations and norms about the acceptability and appropriateness of sexual content, collapse into a single, undifferentiated audience due to the public nature of social media platforms. The ensuing complexity can cause significant challenges for content creators as they navigate the intricate terrain of self-presentation and audience expectation, potentially leading to self-censorship, performance, or even deplatformization.

Danah boyd's (2002, 2008, 2010) work significantly contributes to the literature on context collapse. Her seminal research contends that digital environments precipitate a convergence of an individual's discrete social identities, leading to what she has incisively termed a "context collapse." This convergence, driven by the inherently public and multifaceted nature of online platforms, thus forms a cornerstone in our understanding of self-presentation and identity management in digital spaces. Boyd's take on context collapse encapsulates the challenges of navigating the nuanced norms and expectations of disparate audience groups on social media platforms (boyd, 2010). This pertains to how a person's various social circles—family, friends, colleagues, etc.—all converge in the same digital space, creating a complex, multifaceted audience with differing expectations and interpretations. In this networked public, individuals are not just performing for one coherent audience; they are performing for a multitude of overlapping, even conflicting audiences. This dynamic significantly complicates self-presentation strategies, as content suitable for one audience might not be appropriate or well-received by another. Consequently, individuals are compelled to constantly negotiate their identities, striving to reconcile the potentially conflicting norms, expectations, and interpretive frames of their diverse audience groups. This interpretation of context collapse adds a layer of complexity to boyd's framework, reflecting the specific dynamics and challenges of self-presentation and performance on social media. Thus, boyd's conception of context collapse deepens our understanding of how embodied performances unfold within the

networked publics of digital platforms, illuminating the intricate dynamics of self-presentation, audience management, and identity negotiation in these multifaceted social spaces.

Marwick and boyd's (2014, 2010) notion of "imagined audiences" and Davis and Jurgenson's (2014) concept of "context collision" build upon and extend boyd's idea of context collapse. When considered together, they can offer nuanced perspectives on context collapse and insights into the complexities and risks associated with online self-presentation, particularly for creators of sex-centric content on TikTok. First, Marwick and boyd (2010, 2014) provide a crucial perspective on how individuals conduct themselves in online spaces through their concept of "imagined audiences." Within the context of platform studies, "imagined audiences" refer to the mental representation of potential viewers that content creators formulate while producing and presenting their digital content. This imagined audience profoundly shapes the creators' online self-presentation and performance as they anticipate and respond to the expected reactions, expectations, and preferences of this audience.

Marwick and boyd's theory illuminate how users, in their engagements with digital spaces, construct an understanding of their potential audience and, accordingly, mould their online self-presentation. This phenomenon has particular resonance when examining the practices of sexual content creators on platforms like TikTok. These creators must constantly negotiate between their desire for personal expression and the need for appeal within their perceived audience. This delicate balance often results in a more tempered and tailored self-presentation to accommodate a broader, often more heterogeneous, audience, subsequently impacting the authenticity of their online persona. The practice of performing for an "imagined audience" underlies the mechanism of context collapse. Given that creators are addressing a generalized audience rather than discrete individuals, they are implicitly navigating multiple social contexts simultaneously. This navigation conflates different contexts and collapses them into a single digital space, which can lead to misunderstandings or conflicts when the actual audience differs from the imagined one. Especially for sexual content creators, whose work often straddles the boundary between public and private, professional, and personal, and mainstream and marginalized, this

context collapse can present unique challenges, underscoring the intricate interplay between imagined audiences, platform politics, and content governance in the realm of digital sexual expression.

Building on this theoretical conception of the ideational dynamics driving embodied performances on social media, Davis and Jurgenson (2014) offer a more granular exploration of the catalysts for context collapse, positing the concepts of "context collision" and "context collusion." “Context collision” refers to the unexpected convergence of distinct social realms in digital spaces, leading to potentially awkward, confusing, or even harmful situations. It is an unanticipated intermingling of diverse social environments, creating a sudden and often disorienting mashup of social norms and expectations. With sexual content, context collisions can be highly significant and damaging, as collisions of context can lead to unexpected and potentially harmful exposure to content, exacerbating issues related to consent, privacy, and appropriateness. With sexual content often subject to heightened moral and cultural scrutiny, the unforeseen visibility to diverse audiences can lead to an array of negative consequences such as stigmatization, shaming, or violation of community guidelines and legal statutes.

Consider the case of TikTok, a platform where its algorithm, in particular, plays a substantial role in distributing content. The FYP, as previously discussed, is an algorithmically generated feed of videos tailored to users primarily based on their viewing habits, as opposed to their individual social networks. This algorithmic distribution of content takes away much of the user's choice of context and has the potential to place explicit sexual content in front of unintended audiences. For example, a TikTok creator might create an educational video about safe sexual practices, intending it for an audience of like-minded activists or individuals seeking such information. However, because of the algorithm's unpredictable nature, the video might appear on the FYP of users outside the intended audience, such as conservative viewers who may misinterpret the content as promoting promiscuity, or even younger users for whom such content is inappropriate.

Similarly, instances where explicit content, intended to advertise adult websites, appears on the feeds of underage users is a significant concern. Here, the algorithms of TikTok inadvertently lead to a context collision, blurring the lines between adult and general audience spaces. This collision of public

and private displays of sexuality mediated by digital platforms underscores the significance and potential harm of context collisions. Thus, these scenarios underscore the complexities and potential hazards of context collapse on platforms like TikTok, where algorithmic content curation can inadvertently lead to collisions of distinct social contexts. The centrality and context-making power of the platform's algorithm to shape user experiences brings a new dimension to the phenomenon of context collapse, illustrating how technology can catalyze unexpected and, at times, problematic intersections of diverse social realms.

Davis and Jurgenson (2014) propose that context collapse can result from “context collusion”; which, they define as a conscious effort to merge, blur, and simplify various social contexts (480). While “context collision” highlights the potential conflicts and misunderstandings that may arise from unintentional overlaps of different social worlds, “context collusion” underscores the proactive strategies that individuals employ to negotiate these overlaps. Context collusion, according to Davis and Jurgenson (2014), involves individuals purposefully erasing or minimizing the boundaries between distinct social spaces, such as public spaces and what is seen as traditionally private spaces, often to manage complex online identities or to simplify the task of self-presentation to diverse audiences. In this process, individuals intentionally collapse their various social spheres into a simplified, singular context, flattening the complexities of multi-faceted social identities. It is crucial to note the role of intentionality in distinguishing between “context collision” and “context collusion”. “Context collision" is a by-product of the complexities of digital social environments, often happening without the individual's intention or even awareness. In contrast, “context collusion” is an active strategy to manage these complexities, indicating an intentional act of collapsing distinct social contexts. This nuanced understanding of the mechanics of context collapse provided by Davis and Jurgenson significantly enriches our theoretical framework for analyzing the dynamics of digital self-presentation.

In understanding the complexities of context collusion, it's helpful to consider it as a strategic and interactive process, occurring at both individual and collective levels. At the individual level, context collusion can involve creators intentionally crafting a contextually specific script or aesthetic that resonates with their specific audience, effectively merging various aspects of their identity into a

coherent, palatable persona. Here, collusion is a co-created process between the performer and their audience, a mutual understanding that allows for certain expressions of identity and behaviours that may not fit neatly within conventional social contexts. Meanwhile, at the collective level, context collusion can manifest as shared languages, aesthetics, and behaviours that become ingrained within a digital culture. This collective collusion is not just an aggregation of individual actions, but a dynamic process shaped by community norms, shared experiences, and collective needs.

The concept of 'digital sexual culture' on TikTok can be seen as an embodiment of this collective context collusion, where a network of creators and viewers collectively evolve a shared language (like using 'seggs' for sex or employing specific emojis or aesthetics to signify sexual content) and norms to navigate the platform's content regulations and societal taboos surrounding sexual discussions. This digital sexual culture on TikTok can be particularly prominent within specific communities, such as sex workers, and those within the Kink and Fetish communities. These communities often have unique dynamics and needs, which drive the creation and adoption of specific colluded contexts. For example, TikTok's guidelines and societal norms around explicit sexual content might push sex workers and educators to use coded language, emojis, or visual cues to signify certain concepts without explicitly stating them, allowing them to communicate with their audience while avoiding potential censorship or backlash. Similarly, members of the kink and fetish communities might employ specific aesthetics or terminologies that are recognizable to insiders, creating a colluded context that maintains their privacy while facilitating community-building. These examples of context collusion illustrate a proactive negotiation and strategic blurring of contexts to manage the potential pitfalls of context collapse or collision. In doing so, they highlight the agency of digital content creators and communities in shaping their digital environments, navigating platform constraints, and managing complex online identities.

The emphasis on the intentionality behind context collapse adds a new dimension to our understanding of the complexities of online identity performance. Creators are not merely subjected to the whims of context collapse but actively engage in shaping their online personas through context collusion. When incorporated into the broader theoretical framework of context collapse, embodied performance,

and governmentality, the concept of context collusion adds an additional layer of agency to our understanding of the dynamics at play in sex-centric content creation on TikTok. It emphasizes that creators are not just passive recipients of platform governance but active participants who employ strategic practices to negotiate and navigate the complexities of online presentation. Their performances are not only responses to external forces but are shaped by their active engagement with multiple socio-cultural and technical contexts. Understanding this intentional aspect of context negotiation illuminates the complex dynamics of power, identity, and control at play in the digital sphere. It showcases the creators' agency in the face of context collapse, highlighting their capacity to resist, adapt, and influence the structures of platform governance.

The challenging process of maneuvering between personal expression and platform mandates is made all the more complex by the concept of "counterpublics," introduced by Michael Warner (2022, 2002). Warner's concept of "counterpublics" explains how alternative, often marginalized, publics form and express themselves in opposition to mainstream societal norms. Warner (2022) defines “counterpublics” as subaltern, marginalized, or non-dominant groups who create their own discourse spaces and communication styles to contest, negotiate with, or challenge dominant societal norms and hegemonic discourses. These spaces facilitate the cultivation of identities, practices, and discourses that may deviate from mainstream cultural norms, thus serving as crucial sites for the expression and assertion of non-dominant identities.

In the context of TikTok, the public and private spheres of sexual discourse intersect in unique ways to create a digital counterpublic. Content creators sharing sexual content must negotiate the public nature of the platform and societal norms around privacy in sexual matters. They manage this intersection by creating shared, colluded contexts within which they can freely discuss and represent sexual content, effectively creating a counterpublic that challenges conventional public-private distinctions around sexuality. This counterpublic not only redefines the boundaries of public discourse around sexuality but also highlights the transformative power of digital platforms in shaping societal norms and identities. In this sense, TikTok becomes a stage for these counterpublics to perform their identities, actively

challenging the mainstream norms and regulations of the platform. These performances, however, while significant for representation and visibility, often clash with platform policies, intensifying the experience of context collapse.

Within the theoretical frame of counterpublics, the dynamics of embodied performances, context collapse, context collision, and context collusion take on heightened significance. Counterpublics, as alternative social spaces that challenge prevailing narratives, form a critical site for embodied performances—acts that communicate and contest societal norms through the body and digital representation. This is notable on TikTok, where creators' performances are not simply personal expressions, but serve as political acts that confront both mainstream norms and platform regulations. Embodied performances in these counterpublics, whether sexual in nature or otherwise, must navigate the multi-faceted tensions of digital environments, shaped by both the inherent governmentality of the platforms and the varying audience expectations. Governmentality, as Dean (1999) expounds, encapsulates the complex governance dynamics present in digital platforms, governing both the creators and their audiences in subtle and overt ways. This intricate framework of power relations and knowledge structures exacerbates instances of context collapse, where creators are tasked with managing their complex identities in front of a diverse, often unexpected audience. Simultaneously, these same governing dynamics can trigger context collisions, as creators' content, meant for one social sphere, inadvertently clashes with the norms and expectations of another, leading to potential controversy or conflict. To manage this complexity, creators often resort to context collusion, strategically merging or simplifying their social contexts to construct a unified identity that resists the disruptive impacts of context collapse and collision.

In summary, the intricate intersection of embodied performances, counterpublic formations, and platform governmentalities illuminate the complex dynamics of digital content creation. This interplay of dynamics between individual or group performances, societal expectations, and governance and regulation provides a nuanced understanding of the continual negotiation and tension inherent in digital platforms, particularly in spaces dealing with sexual content, where the consequences of context collapse

can be considerably consequential. On TikTok, content creators' performances can thus be seen as not just personal expressions, but also political acts of contestation against mainstream norms and platform regulations. As Warner's notion of counterpublics emphasizes, the role of these groups in disrupting and challenging the dominant discourses, draw attention to the resistance and pushback against existing power structures. Consequently, the intersection of counterpublic performances and platform governmentality adds another layer of complexity to the context collapse, highlighting the ongoing tension between individual or group performances, societal expectations, and the governance rules of the digital space.

The application of the context collapse concept to the study of TikTok and sex-centric content provides a lens through which the experiences and behaviours of content creators can be examined, considering the diverse audiences to which they perform, and how these performances are shaped by the governmentality of the platform itself. In the context of sex-centric content creation on TikTok, this could mean having to manage the expectations of various audience groups—from casual viewers, dedicated followers, to platform regulators—while also staying true to their personal values and creative aspirations. Building upon this theoretical foundation, these creators are indeed engaged in a performative act that resonates with Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical analysis of social interaction.

From his perspective, individuals play out roles akin to actors on a stage, putting forth a calculated and managed performance to create certain impressions in the minds of their audience. Goffman's theory provides a valuable lens to analyze how content creators, as performers, negotiate their identity expressions in the complex digital sphere of TikTok. The relevance of Goffman's work becomes even more pronounced when we consider his concepts of "stigma" and "information control" (Goffman, 1963). Stigma, in Goffman's terms, refers to an attribute that is deeply discrediting within a particular social interaction. Information control, on the other hand, pertains to the strategies individuals or groups employ to manage their stigmatized identities, to control how others perceive them. These concepts provide a nuanced understanding of the intricate interplay between performance and governmentality within the phenomenon of context collapse.

Content creators, especially those generating sex-centric content, may encounter stigma due to societal norms and platform regulations. They may face scrutiny or negative reactions from various audiences that converge in the digital space, exacerbating the risks of context collapse. In response, these creators often resort to various forms of information control, managing their identities and curating their performances in an attempt to navigate stigma and conform to societal and platform expectations. However, these strategies, while adaptive, often result in self-censorship and a limitation of their own performances. This dynamic epitomizes the paradox of governmentality within digital platforms - creators, while they possess some degree of agency, are also constrained by the platform's algorithms and regulations, societal norms, and the potential backlash from various audience segments. The influence of governmentality on creators is thus made palpable in how they control and limit their performances in response to perceived stigma. Considering this, Goffman's theories offer vital insights into the paradoxical power dynamics involved in navigating context collapse on platforms like TikTok. The negotiation of performance, identity, and visibility within the confines of context collapse, embodied performance, and governmentality presents a complex dance of power relations, where content creators continuously balance between self-expression, platform rules, and audience expectations.

3.3. Sexual Contexts on Social Media: Collapsing, Colliding, Colluding, and Condensed

Given the intricate interplay of context collapse, embodied performance, governmentality, and the nuanced negotiations that creators engage in, it is crucial to introduce the theoretical concept of "sexual context collapse." This concept expands upon boyd's notion of context collapse but specifically focuses on the unique dynamics involved in the creation and dissemination of sex-centric content. Within this framework, creators encounter the phenomenon of "collapsing contexts of sex," where the diverse contextual expectations of different audiences intersect with the inherently sexual nature of the content, leading to "sexual context collisions." These collisions, which are expanded upon below, highlight the challenges and complexities creators face in navigating the multiplicity of audience expectations and platform regulations surrounding sexual content.

When creating content, sexual content creators face the complex task of considering the perspectives of their audience, societal norms, and platform regulations, all of which view sexual content with varying degrees of scrutiny. In this context, the concept of the "imagined audience" expands beyond Marwick and boyd's (2011) description, encompassing subsets of audiences with diverse attitudes towards sexuality and sexual themes in digital content. These imagined audiences may include supporters, critics, casual viewers, dedicated followers, and potential trolls. As such, the imagined audiences play a pivotal role in shaping the performance and presentation of sexual content creators, who must navigate the intricate landscape of different perceived audiences, each with their own attitudes, beliefs, and expectations surrounding sexual content (Marwick & Boyd, 2010). Supporters provide validation and foster a sense of community, while critics may view the content as inappropriate or offensive. Meanwhile, casual viewers stumble upon the content without specific interest, dedicated followers actively seek and engage with it, and potential trolls aim to provoke or disrupt the creator's online presence.

Moreover, "sexual context collapses" in a broader sense occurs when the delicate balance of managing the expectations of various audiences, societal norms, and platform regulations crumbles, subjecting the creator to criticism, platform penalties, or even harassment. In this context, the concept of context collapse extends beyond the audience and incorporates the platform's environments, regulatory frameworks, and algorithmic influences. The platform, including its algorithms, becomes an integral part of the imagined audience, shaping the performance of sexual identities (Finn, 2017). The platform's expected use, community norms, and algorithmic influence shape the content creator's understanding of the audience and their creative decisions. Algorithmic logics employed by the platform play a significant role in determining the visibility, reach, and impact of sexual content. As content creators tailor their performances to align with the platform's prescribed norms and expectations, they are acutely aware of the algorithm's role in amplifying or suppressing their content. This awareness introduces a layer of self-regulation as creators navigate the platform's regulatory framework and anticipate the algorithmic preferences of the platform and its user base. Thus, the platform environment, with its algorithmic

mechanisms, becomes an influential component of the imagined audience, impacting the choices content creators make and potentially exacerbating the risk of sexual context collapse.

As such, the platform and its algorithmic underpinnings act as critical 'audience members,' their influence inescapable and continually shaping the production, circulation, and reception of content. Algorithms, like audience members, 'listen' to and 'watch' the performances taking place on the platform, making determinations about visibility and audibility, guiding users towards specific types of content and steering their interactions (Nagy & Neff, 2015). This algorithmic 'viewership' becomes a significant factor that creators must account for in their self-presentation, content design, and interaction strategies. In essence, the imagined audience is not just a human, networked collective, but a multi-dimensional assemblage, where human and non-human entities coalesce, influencing and being influenced by the dynamics of digital interactions. The platform and its algorithm, by acting as 'audience members,' fundamentally alter the creator's sense of their 'imagined audience,' blending the lines between human users and technical infrastructures and adding a layer of complexity to the phenomenon of context collapse within the realm of online sexual content creation.

This complex interplay of human and non-human audience members is evident in the concept of "algorithmic recognizability" — a term that encapsulates how content creators actively strategize to make themselves and their content more 'visible' or 'readable' to the platform's algorithm (Gillespie, 2014, 183). By understanding and adapting to the platform's algorithmic logic, creators aim to enhance the visibility and reach of their content, thus maximizing its potential affective impact. Conversely, in order to evade the risks associated with algorithmic detection — such as content takedowns or deplatforming — creators might deliberately perform in ways that are 'unrecognizable' or less 'visible' to the algorithm. These adaptive strategies often involve a delicate balancing act, where creators negotiate between appealing to their human audiences, adhering to platform guidelines, and navigating –through strategic engagement and disengagement–the platform's algorithmic architecture to optimize content reach and maintain their online presence, all while minimizing the risk of context collapse and deplatforming (Duffy & Meisner,

2023). This dynamic underline the intricate relationship between 'imagined audiences,' context collapse, and platform power within the realm of online sexual content creation.

This expanded conceptualization of the imagined audience to consider non-human audience members recognizes that the imagined audience is not solely a social construct but is also shaped by the cultural and technological dimensions of the platform. Therefore, the imagined audience in the realm of sexual content creation encompasses a spectrum of contexts, societal attitudes, platform regulations, and algorithmic influences, all of which interact to shape the performance and reception of sexual content. It is within this intersection of the social and technical aspects that the complexity of the imagined audience emerges, necessitating a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and contextual nuances surrounding sexual content. The current lack of clear segmentation and understanding of these diverse imagined audiences, or the collapse of sexual context, by both platform intermediaries and creators, can contribute to what can be termed as "collapsing contexts of sex." These phenomena occur when the distinct social contexts and attitudes towards sexual content are not effectively acknowledged or delineated. It results from a failure to recognize the multiplicity of audience perspectives and the corresponding contexts in which sexual content is consumed, leading to collisions between differing norms, values, and expectations. This collapsing of sexual context can have problematic consequences.

Without a proper understanding of the diverse contexts in which sexual content is perceived and created, there is a heightened risk of misunderstandings, conflicts, and misinterpretations of the creator's intentions. The lack of clear segmentation and delineation of audience perspectives contributes to a one-size-fits-all approach to content moderation, where sexual content is often scrutinized and restricted based on societal norms and platform regulations that may not fully align with the intentions or preferences of content creators or certain audience segments. Collapsed sexual context can reinforce societal stigmas and perpetuate moralistic judgments towards sexual content. When diverse sexual contexts are collapsed into a single binary understanding, it disregards the wide spectrum of sexual expressions, identities, and desires. This narrow perspective fails to recognize the complexities and nuances of sexual content, limiting the creative agency of content creators and inhibiting the exploration of diverse sexual narratives

and representations. This reductionist perspective, collapsing contexts of sex, in turn, create a fertile ground for "sexual context collisions"-- instances where the collision of multiple perspectives and expectations intersect, potentially causing tensions, controversies, or controversies within and across platforms. The ability to pre-empt, manage, and negotiate these "sexual context collisions" becomes a necessary factor in maintaining the creators' online presence and managing the potential stigma associated with their content.

More specifically, the concept of "sexual context collisions" refers to the clashes and conflicts that arise when different sexual contexts intersect or collide within the platform. It encompasses not only collisions between imagined audiences but also collisions between the platform environment, including its regulatory frameworks and intended technical affordances, and the algorithmic mechanisms that shape content visibility and reach. “Sexual context collisions” occur when the expectations, norms, and regulations of various contexts, such as societal norms, community expectations, and platform guidelines, collide and create tension for content creators. These collisions may manifest as clashes between different audience interpretations, misunderstandings, or conflicts arising from the diverse expectations and values held by individuals or groups.

Contextual clashes between performances and platform politics and governance further contribute to the complexity of sexual context collisions. As content creators navigate the intricacies of self-presentation and performative acts, they must grapple with the constraints and affordances imposed by technological governance mechanisms and socio-technical aspects of the platform. These clashes become pronounced when creators push the boundaries of content guidelines or societal norms, seeking to challenge or subvert prevailing discourses or beliefs around sexuality. They can lead to a collapse when the platform's content governance practices, driven by algorithmic logic or societal norms, fail to accommodate the nuanced and diverse expressions of sexuality, resulting in deplatforming or marginalization of certain voices and perspectives. This clash between embodied performances and content governance mechanisms highlights the power dynamics and struggles that emerge in the

intersection of user agency, platform politics, and societal norms within the realm of sexual content creation on social media platforms.

In the realm of sexual content creation, sexual context collisions can pose significant challenges for content creators. They must contend with the collision of their own intentions and creative expressions with the expectations and restrictions imposed by platform environments and algorithms. These collisions can manifest as tensions between personal values, desired audience engagement, and the need to conform to platform rules and algorithmic preferences. Content creators may find themselves grappling with the delicate balance between authenticity and visibility, as they strive to navigate the collision between their own artistic vision, community expectations, and the platform's governance mechanisms.

Understanding and effectively managing sexual context collisions require content creators to engage in constant negotiation, adaptation, and strategic decision-making to maintain their online presence and preserve the integrity of their sexual content. Moreover, sexual context collisions highlight the power dynamics inherent in the digital space. Content creators must negotiate the collision between their agency as creative individuals and the influence exerted by platform environments and algorithms. The collision between individual expression and platform control raises questions about the asymmetrical power relations embedded within the digital ecosystem. Content creators must grapple with the tension between self-expression and conforming to platform norms, which might stifle their creative autonomy. By recognizing and grappling with these sexual context collisions, content creators face the complex interplay between individual agency, platform governance, and the algorithmic shaping of content visibility and reach.

The risk of sexual context collapse significantly amplifies the challenges faced by sex-centric content creators, leading to heightened self-censorship and information control. In these scenarios, the concept of "sexual context collusion" emerges as a strategic manoeuvre. "Sexual context collusion" refers to the intentional blending of sexual content with mainstream or broadly accepted elements to communicate targeted messages while evading platform restrictions or societal norms. It is a subtle form of resistance where creators navigate the complexities of various contexts, managing the potential stigma

associated with their content and maintaining their digital presence effectively. Creators may deliberately blend elements of sexual expression with more broadly accepted or mainstream content, or subtly communicate their message to specific audiences while circumventing the algorithmic detection and restrictions. This intentional collusion of contexts becomes a tactic to maintain control over their digital presence, manage potential stigma, and navigate the complexities of platform regulations.

At the same time, the negotiation of sexual content creation creates unique "sex-centric counterpublics". "Sex-centric counterpublics" can be more specifically defined as distinct digital communities primarily formed around the production, consumption, and discussion of sex-centric content that exists in opposition to mainstream norms and ideologies. These counterpublics serve as a platform for individuals who engage with and share sexual content to gather, communicate, and collectively resist the stigmatization and marginalization they experience because of their content preferences and expressions. Contrary to the traditional conception of counterpublics as oppositional to the mainstream, sex-centric counterpublics are more interactive and dynamic. They engage in a dialectic process with the mainstream, not only resisting but also reshaping societal norms surrounding sexual content, challenging the status quo by articulating alternative narratives of sexual expression that become embodied through online performance. Thus, sex-centric counterpublics become vital spaces of contestation, offering opportunities for creators to challenge the stigma associated with their content, and to redefine norms of sexual expression in the digital realm. These counterpublics play a significant role in challenging and redefining norms of sexual expression, thus playing a pivotal role in disrupting and resisting existing power structures.

In conclusion, in order to effectively navigate the complexities of collapsing contexts of sex and sexual context collisions, a conceptual framework that recognizes and engages with the nuances of audience perspectives is essential. This framework should encompass the diverse imagined audiences and their corresponding contexts, including societal norms, cultural values, platform regulations, and algorithmic influences. By acknowledging the multiplicity of perspectives and the dynamic nature of these contexts, content creators can better anticipate and address potential conflicts, misinterpretations, or

misunderstandings that may arise. Moreover, a nuanced understanding of the audience and their diverse contexts allows creators to tailor their content strategically, ensuring that it aligns with the expectations of different imagined audiences while maintaining their creative agency and authenticity. The development of such a conceptual framework (summarized below) is crucial for fostering a more inclusive and informed approach to the governance and reception of sexual content, enabling creators to navigate the complex landscape of collapsing contexts and sexual context collisions with greater agency and efficacy.

Sexual Context Collapse Framework:

1. **Collapsed Sexual Context:** Situation where different social contexts and attitudes towards sexual content are not effectively delineated, leading to merging, or blurring, of contexts. This causes misunderstandings, conflicts, or misinterpretations of the creator's intentions. Occurs when the expectations, norms, and regulations of various contexts collide, creating tensions for content creators.

2. **Colliding Sexual Context:** Clashes and conflicts arising from intersecting sexual contexts within the platform. Includes collisions between diverse audience attitudes towards sexual content and between platform regulations/affordances and creator intentions. Highlights challenges in navigating audience expectations, platform rules, and societal norms.

3. **Colluding Sexual Context:** Intentional blending of sexual content with mainstream or accepted elements to communicate targeted messages while avoiding platform restrictions or societal norms. Used by creators to manage stigma, maintain digital presence, and navigate platform regulations.

4. **Condensed Sexual Context:** Focused and explicit communication of sexual themes or intentions. Characterized by clear depiction of sexual acts, desires, or themes, including content like pornography or certain forms of sex work. Represents the explicit end of the sexual context spectrum.

3.4. A Content Spectrum of Sexual Contexts

The challenge of interpreting sexual contexts in content on platforms like TikTok lies in the intricacies inherent to its spectrum of varying dynamics. From a governance standpoint, social media platforms often resort to a binary system for moderating sex-centric content: labeling it as either sexually explicit or not. This simplification overlooks the multifaceted intentions, purposes, and values of such content. Strict moderation policies, exemplified by TikTok's Community Guidelines, aim to minimize explicit sexual content to sustain broad platform appeal. However, this reductionist approach, by compressing diverse sexual contexts into a singular category, fails to capture the nuanced nature of digital content creation and the varied perceptions by distinct audience groups.

The "sexual content spectrum" emerges as a vital concept in addressing the limitations of binary content classifications. It encompasses the diverse contexts, interpretations, and nuances inherent to sexual content, highlighting its existence on a continuum rather than a dichotomy. Such a spectrum acknowledges the varying forms and meanings that sexual content can assume, eliciting disparate reactions across audiences. Consequently, effective content moderation needs to consider the intricacies of this spectrum to craft nuanced governance strategies. Only by appreciating its intricacies and the myriad reactions it can prompt among different user groups can platforms devise more nuanced and adaptive governance strategies. Such informed moderation would pave the way for a more inclusive and accurate reflection of user experiences and needs, while still upholding platform standards and community values.

Building upon the earlier assertion that content moderation demands an in-depth understanding of the "sexual content spectrum," we can view this spectrum as a multi-dimensional continuum that transcends a simplistic binary categorization of sexual content. On one end, it features overtly explicit content, such as pornography or certain depictions of sex work, where sexual intent is unmistakably clear. Progressing along the spectrum, one encounters suggestive or provocative material, like specific advertising campaigns or music videos, laden with sexual undertones, but not necessarily depicting explicit acts. Further along are educational facets, addressing topics from sexual health and education to nuanced discussions on consent. The romantic and emotional portrayals of intimacy, prevalent in various media formats, also find their place here. Importantly, the spectrum is also inclusive of the diverse and fluid expressions of sexuality, encompassing queer identities, trans narratives, and a myriad of non-conventional practices. Recognizing this spectrum is instrumental in capturing the richness of sexual content and its diverse interpretations, contingent upon an individual's personal, technological, and cultural context. Therefore, this "sexual content spectrum" not only elucidates the multifaceted nature of sexual content but also underscores the need for a layered and discerning approach to its governance.

Transitioning from a binary perspective of categorizing content as either "appropriate" or "not," we must recognize the nuances within the broader landscape of digital content, particularly sexual

content. Instead of merely labeling content as pornographic or otherwise based on explicitness, it becomes vital to position the content within a continuum of contexts, each serving distinct purposes and intentions. Such a shift prompts us to re-evaluate the term 'explicitness' in sexual content. Instead of associating explicitness strictly with eroticism, social media platforms must broaden their governance perspective to ask: How explicitly does the content convey its underlying intentions, purposes, and contexts? For instance, a sexual health campaign, while discussing intimate matters, might be explicit in its educational intent. Conversely, a music video may subtly intertwine sexual undertones with artistic representation. This shift requires us to critically appraise not only the overt presentation of the content but also the creative labor that goes into its formation, as well as the ultimate purpose it serves. By embracing this nuanced understanding, we can transition from a black-and-white viewpoint to a more sophisticated approach that comprehends the intricate shades of intentionality, representation, and context within the realm of sexual content.

This re-conceptualization offers a transformative solution to some of the entrenched problems in platform politics and governance. One of the primary issues platforms grapple with is "context collapse," where diverse meanings and intentions behind content are flattened into a monolithic understanding, often leading to misinterpretation or misjudgment. By acknowledging a continuum of contexts, platforms can better navigate the nuances of content, preventing such collapses. Additionally, "context collision" – where disparate audiences interpret content differently due to varying cultural, social, or personal lenses – can be mitigated by understanding where content lies on the continuum, helping platforms to better anticipate diverse audience responses. This perspective also addresses the issue of "collusion," where platforms might inadvertently favor or suppress certain content types due to oversimplified categorization mechanisms. A nuanced understanding of the spectrum of intentions and purposes allows for a more equitable approach, ensuring that content is moderated and curated with a fuller appreciation of its place within the broader digital tapestry. In essence, this reimagined approach offers platforms a more comprehensive toolkit to address the multifaceted challenges of content governance in the digital age.

By understanding sexual content within this spectrum of contexts–collapsed, colliding, colluded, and condensed– a more nuanced approach to conceptualizing and moderating sexual content on social media can be achieved. This proposed framework acknowledges the complexity of sexual themes, intentions, and purposes and offers a way to navigate the challenges of context collapse, blurred boundaries, and diverse audience expectations. The above perspectives collectively reinforce the layered complexity of the online environment. In essence, the negotiation of embodied performances on digital platforms is underpinned by a continuous dance with context collapse, affected by an intricate web of user agency, imagined audiences, affective publics, and algorithmic governances. These perspectives offer a nuanced understanding of how online performances are shaped, perceived, and consumed, shedding light on the increasingly intricate interplay between personal expression, audience interpretation, and platform politics. Woven together, this theoretical grounding offers a holistic lens to understand the nuances of sexual content creation on TikTok, contributing significantly to the study of platform politics and digital body politics.

3.5. Case Study: TikTok's Sexual Context Collapse

In this journey to unpack the interplay between sexual content creators and platforms, TikTok stands out as an illustrative case study for dissecting the interpretation of sexual contexts. Given the inherent risk of contextual collapse, this section will critically examine the nuances of TikTok's modus operandi in this domain. A meticulous assessment of TikTok's community guidelines and content moderation policies reveals the platform's delineation and stance on sexual content. These normative documents provide a window into how TikTok might inadvertently simplify or even homogenize the rich tapestry of sexual contexts. This analytical deep dive into TikTok's regulatory framework raises pointed questions about its efficacy in fostering a digital milieu that is both inclusive and conducive to nuanced dialogues on sexual identities and experiences. The crux of this investigation hinges on discerning whether TikTok's operational approach might, albeit unintentionally, reinforce the collapse of sexual

contexts by relying on broad and potentially reductive categorizations, failing to account for the multifaceted nature of sexual expression.

TikTok's community guidelines are emblematic of the platform's interpretation of what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable 'sexual context' in content. This interpretation, however, is complicated by the platform's desire to accommodate a wide range of users, leading to a broad and somewhat vague policy. The complication arises from TikTok's "respecting local context" principle, which the platform's corporate guidelines define as" respecting local context and not imposing the norms of one country on another" which has led the company to allow "some of the exceptions to the guidelines" and apply them differently across regions (TikTok, 2023). Though, the company does not specify exactly how this governance differs across national borders. While the principle of "respecting local context" holds the potential for ensuring cultural relevance and appropriateness in content moderation, it simultaneously raises the question of inconsistent application of policies, giving room for subjectivity and potential bias. As the guidelines currently stand, they allow space for varying interpretations based on regional contexts, yet they do not provide a clear delineation of what makes up these regional differences, leaving content creators navigating a landscape fraught with ambiguity. This could inadvertently allow space for oppressive local norms to influence content moderation, leading to potential suppression of voices and perspectives surrounding sexual identities and behaviours that are marginalized or stigmatized within specific cultural contexts.

Despite its recognition of the platform as a space for dialogue on sexuality, sex, or reproductive health, TikTok's community guidelines exhibit notable ambiguities. The 'Sexual Activity and Services' section, while explicitly prohibiting content related to sexual arousal, fetish and kink behaviours, and the solicitation of sexual services, fails to provide a clear demarcation between discussions on sexuality and what constitutes 'sexual arousal'. This lack of precision leaves room for interpretative variances, posing the critical question: where exactly does TikTok draw the boundary between educational discourse on sex and content that could inadvertently incite arousal? Such ambiguities can create significant

inconsistencies in content moderation and, more broadly, challenge our understanding of how platforms arbitrate the vast continuum of sexual expression.

In TikTok's community guidelines' section on 'Nudity and Body Exposure' a universal prohibition is set on the display of "genitals, buttocks, and the nipples and areolas of women and girls" on the platform. Though, it also acknowledges regional exceptions and cultural norms, implying that these norms determine the moderation of content to a certain extent. However, this policy raises questions about how the platform defines nudity and how it addresses the subjectivity of body exposure and its interpretation in diverse cultural contexts. Furthermore, there is an observable double standard in the application of these guidelines to different genders. For instance, the regulations consider the visibility of the nipples and areolas of women and girls as nudity but do not apply the same rule to men and boys. The guidelines on 'Sexually Suggestive Content' are similarly problematic. While they indicate an allowance for some artistic content with sexual references, like song lyrics, the guidelines fall short in providing a clear delineation of what constitutes 'sexually suggestive'. The guidelines note that they consider "seductive performances" and "sexualized posing" as part of this category, but without clear definitions, these terms are open to wide interpretation, which could vary significantly among individuals and cultures.

The impact of these ambiguities within TikTok's community guidelines is profound, as they culminate in a sexual context collapse. This collapse, as described, arises from the inadvertent effect of the guidelines, as they compress a wide spectrum of sexual contexts into a single, broad category heavily influenced by content moderation policies. Consequently, the intricacies of diverse and contextually specific sexual content become obscured and lost within the moderation process. For instance, TikTok's guidelines on nudity and body exposure exemplify this collapse by oversimplifying the understanding of body representation and the performative nature of sexual expression. While the platform claims to celebrate all body types and sizes, it imposes specific restrictions on nudity, such as uncovered genitals, buttocks, and female nipples. This collapse fails to acknowledge the complexities of body representation and the varied ways in which individuals embody and express their sexuality. The guidelines overlook the

potential for presentations of nudity that challenge traditional beauty norms or promote body positivity. For example, body-positive creators may use nudity as a form of empowerment, promoting self-acceptance and challenging societal beauty standards. They may use their bodies as canvases to create art that explores themes of identity, vulnerability, or resilience. By reducing nudity to a binary notion of covered and uncovered, TikTok's guidelines cannot capture the fluidity and diversity of sexual contexts that can emerge from embodied expressions of sexuality.

Furthermore, this collapse in the guidelines disregards the performative nature of sexual expression. It fails to recognize that the meaning and intention behind nudity and body exposure can vary greatly depending on the context and the individual's agency. For instance, a creator may use partial nudity to convey vulnerability or intimacy in a performance or to express their artistic vision. They may engage in body-positive movements that challenge body shaming by reclaiming and celebrating their bodies. TikTok's guidelines do not account for these expressions and instead categorize them within a limited framework that diminishes the complexity of sexual contexts. In this way, TikTok's guidelines on nudity and body exposure contribute to the collapse of sexual contexts by oversimplifying the understanding of body representation and failing to acknowledge the performative aspects of sexual expression. This collapse disregards the potential for nuanced presentations of nudity that challenge societal norms and promote body positivity. It also overlooks, and therefore collapses, the diverse ways in which individuals perform and embody their sexuality through their bodies.

Additionally, TikTok's age-based guidelines represent a well-intentioned effort to shield younger users from potentially harmful content. However, this approach also inadvertently perpetuates a problematic collapsing of diverse sexual contexts. By imposing stringent age-determined categories, the platform limits the possibility for nuanced, empowering, and educational content around sexuality. There's an inherent tension: while TikTok aims to prevent the undue sexualization of younger users, it simultaneously hampers age-appropriate discourse on critical topics like sexual health, consent, and LGBTQ+ rights. The broad-brush categorization, which often restricts content access for users under 18, underestimates the importance of early, comprehensive sex education. For instance, essential dialogues on

contraception, reproductive rights, or STIs might be sidelined. By oversimplifying sexual contexts based on age alone, TikTok hinders rich, informative exchanges on diverse sexual experiences and identities. This approach not only leaves younger users without comprehensive, accurate insights, potentially fostering misconceptions, but also restricts the full spectrum of expression for users of all ages, limiting their ability to explore and understand diverse sexual narratives and identities.

These examples among others, taken together, show how by reducing sexual expression to simplified and predefined categories, TikTok's guidelines do not capture the performative and embodied aspects of human sexuality. Some other examples from the guidelines include their stipulations on 'suggestive' dance routines, where the definition of 'suggestive' remains open-ended, leading to arbitrary interpretations that can stifle creators' expressions. Additionally, the platform's restrictions on certain clothing choices, which may be deemed 'provocative' or 'inappropriate', further homogenize and decontextualize diverse cultural or personal modes of expression. Lastly, the guidelines' vague stance on 'implied nudity', even in artistic or educational contexts, may inadvertently silence important discussions or presentations related to body positivity, art, or health. Collectively, these guidelines, by favoring broad and ambiguous terminology, perpetuate a sexual context collapse and thereby risk ostracizing creators who navigate the vast complexities of sexual expression and identity.

3.6. Conclusion

The theoretical scaffolding of this dissertation is rooted in the intricate web of digital platforms and the myriad of politics, governance mechanisms, and user interactions that permeate them. Central to this investigation is the dynamics of deplatforming and deplatformization of sexual content. Such processes underscore the tension and, at times, conflict between platform policies and practices and the aspirations of users who engage in embodied performances. Their performances stand at the nexus of body politics and are often subjected to the ever-evolving mechanics of platform governance that draw heavily from concepts of governmentality and biopower. In dissecting the layers of these digital engagements, the introduced concept of "sexual context collapse" emerges as a pivotal theoretical tool. It

borrows from the notion of context collapse but situates it firmly within the dialectical relationship between content creators and platform architectures. The core essence of this concept lies in understanding the politics of exclusion, erasure, and marginalization, especially as it pertains to sexual content and its creators. These dynamics, though explored theoretically, will be empirically examined through a case study on TikTok. While the platform's policies offer a top-down perspective on how sexual content is understood and managed, the lived experiences of creators will elucidate the nuances, resistances, and strategies that emerge at the user level.

By synthesizing insights from platform politics and governance, with an emphasis on the lived realities of embodied performances, this dissertation aspires to provide a nuanced and grounded understanding of the interplay between platform regulations and user agency. Such an analytical framework is instrumental in addressing the research question, shedding light on the multi-faceted realm of digital platforms, and how sexual content navigates within these constructed digital terrains.

Chapter 4: Research Methods

Chapter 4 elucidates the scientific methodologies employed in this dissertation's empirical research. A meticulous explanation of the research design and techniques is pivotal to understanding the approach taken. The chapter begins with the mixed-qualitative research approach, examining its epistemological and methodological underpinnings and rationalising the chosen method. The focus then shifts to the specifics of data collection, highlighting participant recruitment, instruments utilized, and the corresponding procedures. Subsequently, the data analysis methods are presented, underscoring the measures taken to ensure data validity and reliability and the techniques for qualitative data interpretation. Ethical considerations encountered during the research and the strategies to address them are also detailed. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the study's limitations, contemplating their impact on the research question, and suggesting avenues for future exploration.

4.1. Qualitative Mixed-Methods: Interviews, Content Analysis, & Observation

Qualitative research is anchored in exploring the meanings and experiences of individuals within their natural contexts (King et al., 1994). It employs methods such as interviews, focus groups, and participant observation to gather data, fundamentally leaning on inductive, interpretive, and subjective analysis techniques (King et al., 1994; Bhattacherjee, 2012). This data, characterized by its richness and complexity, demands rigorous analysis to extract significant insights (Labuschagne, 2003). Rather than seeking broad generalizations from numerical measurements, the core objective of qualitative research is to probe the nuanced experiences and viewpoints of individuals within distinct contexts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, 17; Creswell & Creswell, 2017, 4). Given its focus on discerning the socio-cultural contexts influencing the research phenomena and the unique interpretations individuals assign to their experiences, qualitative inquiry is particularly adept at examining intricate phenomena that resist definition by solely quantitative means (Bhattacherjee, 2012).

In this research, a trifecta of qualitative methods was employed to gather and subsequently analyze in-depth, descriptive data from diverse sources. These methods encompassed semi-structured

interviews, semi-participant observation techniques, and video content analysis. The assimilated data was meticulously scrutinized using qualitative techniques, specifically thematic analysis, discourse analysis, and content analysis. The choice to employ a qualitative approach stemmed from its capability to explore the experiences, viewpoints, and behaviours of sex-content creators on TikTok. Hence, this methodology sought to uncover how sexual content creators traverse the intricate terrain of platform politics and governance on TikTok, explaining the repercussions of these dynamics on their self-expression, identity, and autonomy.

4.1.a. Semi-Structured Interviews

Research interviews are a cornerstone of qualitative research, particularly within social sciences. Their strength lies in extracting detailed insights into participants' experiences, perspectives, and attitudes, making them an invaluable tool for in-depth inquiry (Frances et al., 2009, 309). The procedure involves crafting questions, selecting participants, gathering data, analyzing, and presenting findings. These interviews, structured in a flexible, dialogic manner, cultivate an environment conducive for candid articulation of thoughts and experiences. Their adaptive nature permits deep dives via follow-up questions, granting a nuanced understanding of the research focus. The real-time data collection, grounded in participants' lived experiences, enhances the findings' validity and reliability (Knott et al., 2022). In this study, these interviews were pivotal, enriching the depth and authenticity of the participant narratives.

In the empirical study, qualitative data were gathered by conducting semi-structured interviews with 17 sexual content creators, in order to gather specific information about their experiences with TikTok and their perspectives and behaviours on the platform related to content moderation systems. The researcher selected semi-structured interviews as the preferred method for conducting research interviews. This method balances the structure of structured interviews and the flexibility of unstructured interviews, providing the best of both worlds (Qu & Dumay, 2011; Knott et al., 2022). The semi-structured interview format also allows for a flexible exploration of participants' thoughts and experiences, while still adhering

to a structured framework to ensure consistency and comparability of the data collected (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Compared to structured interviews, which are rigid and predetermined, or unstructured interviews, which lack direction, the semi-structured interview format can offer a tailored approach that allow the interviewer to ask predetermined questions while also providing the opportunity for additional probing questions to further explore the participant's responses (Frances et al., 2009; Knott et al., 2022). This approach permits a flexible and responsive exploration of the phenomena under investigation while maintaining a structured framework to ensure consistency and comparability of the data collected.

The first method for conducting the interviews required preparing an interview question set. The development of the interview question set and prompts for this study involved a meticulous process. Open-ended questions and prompts were deliberately chosen to allow participants to freely share their experiences, thoughts, and feelings without constraints. The question set was structured around three key areas of inquiry: creators' experiences with content moderation; their understandings and perceptions of content moderation; and their efforts to shape content moderation. This framework guided the development of the questions and ensured their relevance and effectiveness in eliciting valuable data.

The first area of inquiry focused on creators' ‘experiences’, which played a crucial role in developing the question set. It inquired into their lived experiences, events, and situations related to content governance on TikTok. By exploring creators' perspectives on content moderation, experiences of censorship and discrimination, and understanding of principles like harm and freedom of expression, the study uncovered valuable insights into the impact of moderation on their online expression and well-being. The second area of inquiry centred on creators' ‘understandings’, aiming to explore the intricate thought processes and mental models that shaped their perceptions of content moderation policies and practices. This theme revealed the subjective experiences and interpretations that influenced creators' understanding of content moderation. It shed light on the motivations and rationale behind moderation policies and their impact on creators' expression, identity, and sense of privacy. Examining creators' subjective experiences and interpretations revealed the complex relationship between content creators and content moderation, offering insights into how policies can facilitate or hinder creative expression and

autonomy. Finally, the third area of inquiry, ‘influences’, referred to the impact of experiences, understandings, and content moderation on the behaviours of sexual content creators. It considered factors such as social, cultural, historical, and political influences, as well as creators' efforts to shape content moderation policies through activism and resistance. Strategic circumvention strategies used by creators to influence content moderation were also considered. This dimension aimed to examine the interrelationships between these elements and their impact on creators' political agency in content governance.

The three-part framework used to design the question set was necessary for answering the research question as it provided a holistic approach to understanding the experiences and perspectives of sex-content creators on TikTok. By exploring the three key areas of inquiry—experiences, understandings, and influences—the question set covered a wide range of factors that influence creators' interactions with content moderation, such as, their online expression, identity, well-being, and political agency. The framework ensured that the research question was approached from multiple angles, capturing the complexity and interplay of various elements involved in content governance on the platform. In order to ensure the question set's validity, the researcher reviewed field notes, relevant literature, and TikTok's community guidelines. Probes were added to gather deeper information about the creators, covering various topics related to the major areas of inquiry. The final question set underwent evaluation by a third party to ensure its ability to gather sufficient data.

Once the question set was developed, the next step involved selecting participants for the study. A purposive sampling strategy was employed, targeting sexual content creators on TikTok who had firsthand experience with content creation and content governance. Purposive sampling is a non-random sampling technique where participants are selected based on predetermined criteria that align with the research objectives. It is used to intentionally select individuals who possess the specific characteristics, knowledge, or experiences relevant to the research study, allowing for a targeted and focused exploration of the phenomenon under investigation (Johnson et al. 2020, 141). The selection criteria aimed to ensure

diversity in terms of creators' demographics, follower count, and engagement levels to capture a wide range of perspectives within the population of interest.

In this study, a purposive sampling approach was employed to select participants who met specific criteria to ensure a focused and relevant sample. The predetermined selection criteria included three key factors: (1) having an active TikTok account with over 2500 followers, which ensured a substantial online presence and a significant reach within the platform's community; (2) producing a repertoire of content related to sex, sexual identity, or sexual expression, which targeted individuals with expertise and experiences in the specific thematic area of interest; and (3) actively engaging in discussions, movements, or activism related to sexual content, showing a higher level of involvement and commitment to the subject. By using purposive sampling, the study aimed to select participants who possessed the characteristics and experiences necessary to provide rich and in-depth insights into the research topic.

The criteria for the purposive sampling were determined to ensure that the sample comprised creators who had a substantial presence on TikTok, were actively involved in creating and discussing sexual content, and were passionate about advocating for their rights and challenging content governance issues. This purposive sampling approach allowed for a targeted and focused selection of participants, ensuring that the study captured the perspectives and experiences of individuals with expertise and involvement in the specific field of interest. By recruiting participants who met the established criteria, the study aimed to gather data that would contribute to a deeper understanding of the experiences, challenges, and dynamics faced by sex-content creators on TikTok.

When it came time to recruit participants using this purposive sampling criterion, the researcher used direct observation and snowball sampling techniques to find creators to participate in the interviews. Three recruitment methods were employed to ensure the identification and engagement of relevant participants. First, in order to actively identify suitable participants, the researcher engaged with TikTok users who emerged on their FYP and met the criteria of being sex-content creators. This involved following and observing their content as part of the recruitment process. In order to do so, the researcher

had to create a dedicated TikTok research account using their university email address, enabling them to collect data within the TikTok ecosystem and facilitating participant engagement.

Once they had access to the platform, the researcher curated a personalized FYP over several months by actively engaging with sex-related content and profiles on TikTok; through actions such as watching, liking, commenting, and following users who regularly posted sexual content. This deliberate engagement signalled a preference for sex-related content and allowed the researcher to train TikTok's algorithm to deliver a customized content feed aligned with the research question. The curated FYP played a crucial role in participant recruitment and data collection, as the researcher used the self-curated content feed to identify potential participants directly on the platform. By observing videos, live streams, comments, trends, and cross-platform behaviours, the researcher identified candidates who exhibited practices and discussions relevant to the research question. This included creators who linked to other inclusive sex-content platforms, openly addressed challenges with content moderation, and used hashtags related to sex, sexuality, and related topics.

The recruitment of participants for the study also involved the utilization of snowball sampling techniques to identify and engage with sex-content creators on TikTok. Snowball sampling was employed as a strategic approach to leverage the social networks and connections within the community of sex-content creators. Initial participants who met the selection criteria were asked to refer the researcher to other potential participants who shared similar characteristics and experiences, creating a chain referral process that expanded the pool of eligible participants. This method allowed for the discovery of individuals who may have been otherwise difficult to reach through traditional sampling methods, enhancing the diversity and breadth of perspectives represented in the study. Ultimately, by leveraging these recruitment strategies, the study recruited a purposive sample of sex-content creators on TikTok, ensuring access to individuals who could provide valuable insights into their experiences and perspectives. The combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques, along with the active engagement on TikTok, facilitated the identification and recruitment of participants who met the selection criteria, contributing to an exploration of the research topic.

Once the participants were identified and expressed their interest in participating, the next step involved getting participants' informed consent to take part in the study. Prior to any data collection activities, the researcher prioritized providing detailed information about the study to ensure participants were fully informed. This included the transmission of an informed consent form to participants, which provided clear explanations of the study's purpose, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were given ample time to review the consent form, which provided a detailed overview of the study and methods and were encouraged to ask questions they had before providing their informed consent to participate in the research. The researcher emphasized the voluntary nature of participation and assured participants they could withdraw from the study without facing negative consequences. This thorough and transparent informed consent process was essential for upholding ethical standards and ensuring that participants fully understood the research and their rights before proceeding with data collection.

Overall, the process of research subject education and informed consent was integral to this study, ensuring that participants clearly understood the research and provided their voluntary and informed consent before participating. The researcher's commitment to maintaining confidentiality, anonymity, and respect throughout the research process upheld the ethical considerations and protected the rights and well-being of the participants. Participants who agreed to take part in the study provided their consent by electronically signing the informed consent form. The researcher securely stored the written consent to protect participants' confidentiality and privacy.

After obtaining informed consent from participants, the research interviews were conducted virtually using audio and video conferencing platforms, including *Zoom*, *FaceTime*, and *Instagram*, depending on participants' preferences and technical capabilities. For participants who preferred an alternative asynchronous interview process, the researcher offered the option to use the Phonic platform or email. This allowed participants to record their responses at their convenience, ensuring their privacy and confidentiality were maintained. During the interviews, with participants' permission, the audio of the interviews was recorded using the selected conferencing platform's built-in recording feature. The

recorded audio files served as the primary source for transcription and subsequent analysis. To ensure accuracy and reliability, verbatim transcripts were meticulously generated by the researcher from the audio recordings. The researcher carefully listened to the recordings, transcribing the dialogue.

Following the transcription process, the researcher employed an inductive thematic content analysis approach to make sense of the rich and detailed data gathered from the research interviews. This involved a careful and iterative process of reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, identifying codes, and grouping them into broader themes, following the method outlined by DeCuir-Gunby (2008) and Linneberg & Korsgaard (2019). Through this iterative and exploratory process, patterns and themes emerged from the responses, leading to the development of a thematic coding scheme to categorize and interpret the data. This inductive, interpretative approach allowed for the development of new insights into the experiences and perspectives of the participants, without being constrained by pre-existing hypotheses or theories typically associated with deductive approaches.

To begin the analysis, the researcher developed initial codes for the thematic coding analysis, drawing on field observations and the research questions. These codes were refined through an iterative process of reading and re-reading the interview data. The next step involved grouping the codes into broader themes, based on similarities and differences in their meanings and contexts. This process resulted in creating a codebook that clearly defined each category. The researcher then applied the codebook to the entire data set, revising and refining the codes and categories as needed. This iterative process ensured the accuracy and representativeness of the codes and categories.

With the codes grouped into concrete themes, the researcher analyzed the themes to identify patterns and connections within the data. This involved exploring the relationships between the themes and their relevance to the research questions and goals. The findings from the thematic analysis were synthesized to draw conclusions about the experiences and perspectives of sex content creators on TikTok in relation to content moderation and platform governance. The rigorous and systematic application of the thematic coding analysis approach allowed for transparent, reliable, and valid analysis, producing meaningful insights that contribute to our understanding of the experiences and practices of sex content

creators on social media platforms. The process of inductive thematic analysis provided a detailed understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives, capturing the complexity of the data collected from the interviews. To ensure the coherence and compatibility of the themes with the coded extracts and the entire data set, the researcher meticulously evaluated each theme. This examination refined the analysis and established a coherent narrative. Additionally, key sub-themes were identified and defined within each theme to provide greater specificity and granularity.

4.1.b. Video Content Analysis

Beyond the utilization of interviews, the empirical study also incorporated a thorough video content analysis, specifically targeting sexual content on TikTok. This methodological choice was pivotal in providing a more holistic understanding of the platform's dynamics, ensuring that both user perspectives from interviews and tangible content were scrutinized to draw comprehensive insights into the manifestation and representation of sexual themes on the platform. Content analysis is a popularly used qualitative research technique that critically analyzes and interprets the visual, technical, and verbal elements of recorded material, such as video and text. This method aims to identify important themes or categories within a body of content and provide a rich description of the social reality created by those themes/categories (Berelson, 1952; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). By carefully preparing the data, coding it, and interpreting the findings, qualitative content analysis supports the development of new theories, validation of existing theories, and provides detailed descriptions of specific settings or phenomena (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). It allows researchers to identify emerging themes and patterns in the data, leading to a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Payne & Payne, 2004). “Video content analysis” is a specialized application of content analysis that focuses on studying the visual, auditory, and narrative elements of video content (Gietzen et al., 2017). It is useful in social science research when analyzing multimedia data from various sources such as social media videos, music videos, films, and advertisements.

In the present study, the researcher specifically applied qualitative video content analysis to a sample of sexual content, or videos from TikTok categorized by the researcher as sexual content. This phase of the research involved a meticulous video content analysis of 1000 pieces of sexual content sourced from TikTok, conducted over the span of April 2022 to June 2023. The analysis constituted a comprehensive examination of a curated collection of sexual content, utilizing both primary and secondary data sources. The richness of the data was further enhanced through methodological triangulation, ensuring a robust and multidimensional exploration of the content.

The process began with content curation, where the researcher's TikTok account was leveraged to systematically gather content from both the 'Following' feed and the 'For You Page' (FYP), guaranteeing a diverse and pertinent collection of videos for analysis. This was followed by the development of a content library through purposive sampling, with selection criteria focusing on the broad presence of sexual themes to cover an extensive range of relevant content. Primary data collection involved the digital recording of selected content, which was then securely and ethically stored on *Dedoose*, an advanced platform facilitating detailed qualitative and mixed-method analyses. Using this purposive sampling method to generate a data source, the analysis that followed data collection involved a systematic examination of the videos from multiple angles, including visual elements such as camera angles, lighting, and props, as well as audio elements like speech patterns, sounds, and more. By employing this qualitative video content analysis method, the researcher aimed to uncover patterns, themes, and meanings in the visual and verbal elements of the videos.

To ensure rigorous and consistent data collection for the video content analysis, the researcher implemented a structured multi-step approach. The initial phase entailed the selection and recording of a representative sample of sexual content on TikTok. In this stage, the development of inclusion criteria was crucial for data collection. To establish these criteria, the researcher referred to TikTok's community guidelines, which outline the platform's definition of sexual content. Based on these criteria, the researcher defined sexual content on TikTok as content that:

- Explicitly or implicitly references, portrays, or engages with various facets of human sexuality.

- Encompasses a range of expressions including sexual behaviors, desires, discussions about anatomy, body exposure, innuendos, and intimate gestures or interactions.
- Addresses discourses surrounding sexual health, consent, identity, orientation, and relationships, potentially informed by both personal and societal contexts.
- Explores the nuanced dynamics of power, pleasure, and agency within sexual experiences.
- Challenges or tests the boundaries of the platform's community standards, either by deliberate creator intention or audience interpretation.

Building on the operational definition of "sexual content on TikTok," the study recognizes the multi-dimensional nature of sexuality as presented on the platform. Beyond the straightforward delineation of explicitness, the content also exists on a continuum of subtlety—where implications, metaphors, and symbols can be as potent in conveying sexual themes as overt displays. Moreover, the definition appreciates that sexual content is not merely a standalone genre but is intricately woven into the fabric of broader societal conversations. Cultural norms, taboos, and historical contexts can greatly influence what is deemed "sexual" in one culture compared to another. Similarly, individual creator intentions, audience interpretations, and the platform's algorithmic influence can all interact to shape the presentation and reception of sexual content on TikTok. By acknowledging these layers, the definition ensures a comprehensive understanding of the sexual content landscape on TikTok, ensuring the research captures both the overt and the understated manifestations of sexual expressions and discussions on the platform.

To document the selected content pieces, the researcher used the screen-record feature on their mobile device, capturing the content for further analysis. These recorded videos were then uploaded to *Dedoose*, a video content analysis software, where they were tagged according to the previously described typology. Besides tagging the content pieces and annotating the sexual attributes of the video content, the process also encompassed the extraction of other data from the recorded video sample to gain insights into the digital interfaces and technical features that facilitate sexual content creation on TikTok. This involved documenting specific details about the audio and video recording and editing processes and tools used by creators, as well as the techniques employed during video editing. The researcher also collected data on the textual comments posted by users and documented the production aspects of live streams.

Once the sample of videos was collected and initially tagged, the researcher further synthesized data from collected videos by categorizing them based on TikTok's description of the "elements of a TikTok video" on *Dedoose*. These categorical elements of a piece of TikTok content include the "look," "sound," "story," and "details" of the video. The "look" category focuses on visual aspects such as camera angle, framing, filters, lighting, props, and textual content. The "sound" category encompasses original audio, voice effects, trending sounds, and voiceovers. The "story" category involves narrative elements such as story type, effects, filters, challenges, and participation in TikTok trends. The "details" category includes metadata elements like title, description, hashtags, usernames, links, comments, and shares.

The systematic categorization of the video data, based on TikTok's framework, enabled the researcher to identify and analyze these practices. In this way, the data collected provided valuable insights into how creators navigate content moderation on the platform using variable visibilities and the socio-technical affordances of the interface, and how they continue to create and distribute prohibited content in the face of these policies. By organizing and categorizing the data based on the elements of a TikTok video, the researcher could systematically identify and record videos that depicted prohibited sexual content and gain an understanding of the structural features and technical affordances of TikTok's interfaces. Overall, this methodical approach to collecting data for the content analysis provided a rich data set for insights into the lived experiences, perspectives, and behaviours of sex-content creators on the platform, and the impact of content moderation on their digital production practices.

During the video content data analysis, each video and associated metadata was thoroughly reviewed by the researcher, many times, paying close attention to the visual, textual, and audio elements, as well as narrative and metadata details. Through this ongoing review process, patterns, recurrent themes, and unique features emerged, providing valuable insights into the experiences, perspectives, and behaviours of adult content creators on TikTok. By adopting a multi-method data collection approach, derived through an iterative process of watching and re-watching, and developing a codebook encompassing the socio-technical dynamics and dimensions of sexual content on TikTok, the researcher aimed to get a holistic understanding of the selected sexual content. This approach involved capturing

various attributes, production techniques, scripts, and user engagement dynamics associated with the content. The meticulous and systematic nature of this data collection process facilitated a thorough analysis of the content and its contextualization within the platform, contributing to a broader understanding of sexual content production and consumption on TikTok.

4.1.c. Observation

Qualitative observation, as a research method, entails a systematic and purposeful approach to observe and describe phenomena within their natural setting, placing particular emphasis on capturing rich and detailed contextual information (Jorgensen, 1989; 2020). By focusing on the nuances and complexities of the observed phenomena, this method aims to acquire an in-depth understanding that extends beyond quantitative data, generating insightful and contextualized knowledge. In the context of social media, qualitative observation allows for the exploration of dynamic interactions, user behaviours, content dynamics, and the social and cultural aspects that shape the experiences of individuals and communities within the digital landscape (Kawulich, 2005). It offers a means to investigate the multifaceted nature of online interactions, uncovering the underlying meanings, patterns, and social dynamics that shape the digital environment and the participants within it.

Over nearly two years, from March 2022 to January 2024, observations were carried out by the researcher 3 to 5 times weekly, with each session lasting between 20 to 120 minutes. Data was rigorously recorded in a structured spreadsheet, complemented by detailed field notes and reflective journaling, to ensure a reflexive approach and comprehensive documentation of both the content and observational insights. In order to facilitate this method, a dedicated TikTok account was established by the researcher for data collection purposes, positioning them as a non-interactive observer within the platform. This account, pseudo-anonymous in nature, was transparently linked to the researcher's professional LinkedIn and a research-specific Instagram account with more information about the research project to maintain ethical transparency.

The observational field was meticulously constructed by curating a follower list solely of 500 sexual content creators, identified through both organic discovery on the For You Page (FYP) and deliberate searches using targeted hashtags. This careful curation created a specialized field within the 'Followers' feed, which was further refined by engaging with the FYP algorithm to prioritize sexual content, thus broadening the observational scope. Employing snowball sampling, the researcher interacted with content from the 'Followers Feed' and strategically with tagged content using specific hashtags to foster an organically evolving community of content creators within the observation scope. Active engagement with the FYP was also a key strategy, using techniques such as complete content viewing and interaction to train the algorithm to favor sexual content, ensuring a relevant and rich dataset.

The observational criteria for this study were meticulously outlined, targeting content types, their distinctive features, creator behaviors, and the level of audience engagement. This entailed a thorough examination of video themes, symbolism, linguistic choices, and the dynamics of interaction between content creators and their followers, alongside the reactions of the audience. Central to this observational methodology was the observation of not only the content generated by the participants but also their engagement mechanisms — from comment threads and video responses to more innovative means. This encompassed an examination of their performance styles, aesthetic choices, textual strategies, and how they navigated the platform's technical possibilities. Interactions within the comment sections, as well as their curated profile presentations, were also closely monitored. Special attention was dedicated to their individual and collaborative live streams, especially the "duet" feature that allowed synchronized broadcasts with fellow creators. Their engagement strategies on auxiliary social media platforms were also dissected, acknowledging the holistic nature of their digital footprint and influence. Central to this observational framework was the maintenance of comprehensive field notes, encapsulating the intricate details of participant activities, social engagements, and overarching contextual dynamics that shaped their choices.

Following the data collection phase, a detailed preparation process ensued, wherein the gathered data was systematically categorized based on the predefined criteria and then subjected to an in-depth

familiarization phase. This set the stage for a nuanced analysis, employing a combination of thematic coding, narrative analysis, and case study methodologies to dissect the intricate layers of the collected data. In thematic coding, a selective, inductive approach was adopted to pinpoint the core themes or concepts pivotal to the research questions. This process involved refining the themes by amalgamating similar ones, omitting irrelevant codes, and centering the analysis on the most critical aspects of the data. Narrative analysis entailed identifying and piecing together narratives within the data that highlight key themes or experiences. This included assembling stories from creators, tracing audience interactions, and tracking the evolution of content over time. Attention was also given to the structure of these narratives, considering the setting, characters involved (both creators and audience members), the plot (content development and interaction), and the resolution (outcomes of interactions or content impacts), alongside a contextual analysis that factored in the broader social, cultural, and platform-specific contexts influencing these narratives.

Case study analysis was another pivotal component, focusing on specific content creators or pieces of content that illustrated intriguing patterns, unique phenomena, or critical cases relevant to the research questions. An in-depth analysis of each case was conducted, taking into account its context, content characteristics, creator behaviors, and audience engagement, with a comparative lens applied across different cases to unearth commonalities, divergences, and insights.

Upon completing these independent analyses, the findings from thematic coding, narrative analysis, and case studies were synthesized to forge a holistic understanding of the observational data. This comprehensive dataset was then integrated into a triangulated analysis framework, in conjunction with data derived from other methodologies employed in the study. This multifaceted analytical approach facilitated the cross-validation of key themes and insights, drawing from a diverse array of data sources and analytical perspectives to ensure a robust and nuanced understanding of the subject matter.

4.2. Data Analysis Methods: Triangulating Qualitative Methods

The empirical study's analysis methodology relies on the utilization of mixed qualitative methods in a triangulation approach to enhance the validity and reliability of its findings. The integration of data from semi-structured interviews, video content analysis, and observations will be meticulously executed through triangulation, a technique renowned for deepening comprehension of the research subject (Creswell & Miller, 2000, 126; Johnson et al., 2020, 142-3). Specifically, this study will implement an iterative and comparative data analysis process for triangulation. The approach involves grounded theory, an inductive method aiming to derive theories directly from data rather than relying solely on pre-existing theoretical frameworks (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This methodology will guide the development of codes and themes, which will then be cross-referenced with other data to affirm the validity and reliability of the findings.

Employing an inductive approach akin to grounded theory, the researcher will analyze data from multiple sources to generate novel theories and insights (Azungah, 2018). This iterative data analysis method is anticipated to unveil nuanced perspectives and creator experiences that may remain concealed through other data collection methods. Consequently, the research process will be anchored in the data itself, creating a dynamic feedback loop where findings inform subsequent steps. This iterative nature will enable the analysis of multiple qualitative data sets, with field notes and participant observations complementing and validating the data garnered from semi-structured interviews and video content analysis. Transcripts will ensure data accuracy and consistency cross-checking. The analysis of video data is projected to unearth key themes concerning the content produced by TikTok's sex-content creators, which will then be further explored in the interviews.

In sum, the triangulation method of analysis in this dissertation’s empirical study is anticipated to enhance the quality and rigor of data analysis and findings identification. By merging diverse data sources and analysis techniques, this approach is expected to facilitate a comprehensive and accurate grasp of the phenomenon. It is envisioned to systematically address potential biases or limitations in data collection and analysis, elevating the validity and reliability of the findings through comparison with existing

literature and meticulous observation. The anticipated utility of this triangulation approach in strengthening the research's validity and reliability underscores its significance in yielding robust and dependable insights that will contribute to the broader discourse on digital body politics, content moderation, and platform politics and governance.

4.3. Assumptions and Limitations in the Research Design

This section will critically assess the intrinsic limitations, assumptions, and potential biases that could influence the research process. Recognizing these factors is essential to ensuring the scholarly rigour and transparency of this endeavour. The foundational assumptions underpinning the research design and methodology offer pivotal insights into the chosen approach and decisions made throughout this investigation. Moreover, reflecting on these limitations and assumptions helps gauge the applicability and generalizability of the study's outcomes. Such an evaluation aids in illustrating the steps taken to counteract these limitations, further bolstering the reliability and validity of our exploration into the nuanced narratives of TikTok's sexual content creators.

4.3.a. Methodological Assumptions

Like all research endeavors, this dissertation is grounded in specific conceptual and methodological assumptions that necessitate thorough examination to comprehend their implications fully. Central to these assumptions is the decision to adopt a purely qualitative approach, aimed at capturing the nuanced experiences and perspectives of sexual content creators on TikTok. This methodological choice is pivotal for several reasons. Qualitatively exploring these narratives allows for a depth of understanding that goes beyond quantifiable data, delving into the rich textures of individual experiences, personal stories, and complex motivations. It facilitates an intimate exploration of how these creators perceive and interact with the platform’s governance structures, shedding light on the subjective realities that quantitative methods might overlook.

The qualitative approach is particularly advantageous in capturing the dynamic interplay of personal agency, platform constraints, and socio-cultural influences that shape content creation. Through

methods such as in-depth interviews, content analysis, and participant observation, this study can unearth detailed insights into the creators' strategic responses to governance policies, their creative processes, and the emotional and psychological dimensions of their work. This approach also allows for a nuanced exploration of themes like censorship, visibility, and community engagement, which are central to understanding the digital ecosystem from the perspective of those who actively shape it. Furthermore, the qualitative methodology is well-suited to study the ever-evolving nature of digital platforms. It provides the flexibility to adapt to the shifting landscapes of online communities and the agility to respond to emergent themes and patterns in real-time. In doing so, this approach not only captures the current state of affairs but also offers a framework to understand potential future trends and challenges faced by sexual content creators on platforms like TikTok. While acknowledging the limitations in generalizability inherent in qualitative research, the rich, detailed insights gained through this approach are invaluable in painting a comprehensive picture of the complex world of digital content creation and platform governance.

While the qualitative approach employed in the dissertation's empirical study offers rich and nuanced insights, it is crucial to recognize its potential limitations in terms of generalizability. The findings derived from a qualitative analysis are deeply contextual and specific to the experiences and perspectives of the participants involved. As such, they may not be universally applicable or representative of the broader population of sexual content creators on TikTok. This limitation is inherent in qualitative research, where depth and detail are prioritized over breadth. The study's conclusions, therefore, should be interpreted as indicative of the trends and patterns within the specific context and participant group, rather than as universally applicable truths. Acknowledging this limitation is essential in accurately framing the scope and applicability of the research findings.

The second consideration pertains to the application of traditional research methods to the study of digital phenomena. The dynamic and rapidly evolving nature of online platforms presents unique challenges that traditional methods may not fully capture. For instance, the fluidity of online interactions, the temporal nature of digital content, and the rapidly changing algorithms and policies of platforms like

TikTok require adaptable and responsive research methodologies. While traditional methods such as interviews and content analysis are invaluable for in-depth exploration, their effectiveness in capturing the entirety of the digital experience is subject to limitations. The research, therefore, engages in a critical examination of these methods, evaluating their strengths in capturing deep insights while also acknowledging their potential shortcomings in addressing the fluidity and dynamism of digital platforms. This introspection adds a layer of rigor to the study, enhancing the understanding of the appropriateness and utility of these methods in digital media research.

Last, the recruitment process and sample size are pivotal components that warrant thorough examination. The selection of participants and the scale of the sample have significant implications for the study's outcomes. There is a potential for biases to emerge based on the specific participant pool chosen. For example, recruiting participants with specific characteristics or from certain online communities may skew the findings, as these individuals' experiences may not represent the broader spectrum of sexual content creators on TikTok. Additionally, the sample size, while sufficient for qualitative depth, may limit the ability to make broader generalizations. It is crucial to critically assess these aspects of the study, acknowledging the potential biases and limitations they introduce. This assessment will provide a clearer understanding of the study's scope and the interpretive weight that should be accorded to its findings.

The process of participant recruitment and the determination of sample size are pivotal in shaping the scope and relevance of any research study. This research adopts a broad definition of "sexual content creators," encompassing a diverse spectrum of individuals engaged in producing sexual content. This inclusive approach broadens the study's scope but also introduces the risk of over-representation of certain subgroups within this category. Additionally, the varying motivations and audiences targeted by different creators add layers of complexity that the study might not fully encapsulate. These factors raise questions about the generalizability of the findings and highlight the critical need for meticulous recruitment and strategic selection of the sample size.

Moreover, the conceptual definition of "sexual content" in this study requires a nuanced understanding of such content on TikTok. It extends beyond explicit sexual activity to encompass

suggestive or implied content, often nuanced or subtly presented to align with the platform's guidelines. This broad definition mirrors the challenges content creators face in navigating strict moderation policies while expressing their perspectives. However, this approach might inadvertently exclude certain content or creators that fall within the conceptual realm of sexual content on TikTok, despite meeting the study's criteria. Additionally, the potential homogenization of sexual content creators' experiences poses a risk. Given the diversity among these creators in terms of their experiences, motivations, and audiences, treating them as a homogeneous group may overlook crucial individual nuances. This study aims to recognize and account for this diversity in its findings.

The ephemeral nature of sexual content on TikTok, characterized by frequent removal and the consequent deplatforming or migration of creators, presents significant challenges in this research. Termed the "ephemeral subject research challenge," this refers to the transient and often fleeting nature of the research subject, where entities such as people, data, and events are continually changing or disappearing due to various factors like sociocultural, legal, technological, or environmental influences. In this context, TikTok's active content moderation policies lead to the systematic removal of sexual content, resulting in a rapidly changing or vanishing subject pool. Researchers often find themselves in a race against time to capture data before it is deleted or becomes inaccessible, introducing potential biases and gaps in the collected data.

This strict enforcement of community guidelines and subsequent deplatforming often results in the rapid invisibility of sexual content and its creators. The shifting landscape transforms the research into a dynamic, almost cat-and-mouse endeavor, necessitating continuous surveillance and prompt documentation of content before it vanishes. The recurrent disappearance and reappearance of content creators not only disrupt the continuity of data collection but also may impact the depth of the research. When creators' profiles are removed, essential data, including historical posts and audience interactions, disappear, potentially leading to an incomplete portrayal of the creators' experiences. Additionally, creators' forced migration to other digital spaces may lead to a loss of critical study participants, as tracking their online movements can be challenging. The focus on more visible or prolific creators might

also result in underrepresentation of less active or discreet ones. Despite these challenges, the ephemeral subject research challenge has provided unique insights into the resilience and adaptability of sexual content creators on TikTok, crucial aspects of their lived experiences. Thus, while the volatile nature of sexual content on TikTok introduces limitations and biases, it is also inherently connected to the very phenomenon this research seeks to explore.

4.3.b. Limitations of the Study and Research Findings

Recognizing and critically examining these methodological assumptions lays the groundwork for a transparent and reflexive approach, thereby strengthening the validity and reliability of the study's findings and illuminating its limitations. This section will examine the limitations of the study, including potential sources of bias, limitations in generalizability, and other factors that may impact the validity and reliability of the findings. It will discuss the limitations and constraints of the research study and acknowledge the potential weaknesses and drawbacks of the study by providing analysis of its limitations. This section is necessary to address the potential for researcher bias, limitations in generalizability of findings, and any other limitations that may affect the validity and reliability of the study. Research bias is a significant concern in qualitative research that can lead to distorted findings and compromise the validity and reliability of the study. This type of bias can arise from various sources, such as the researcher's own beliefs and preconceptions, study design and implementation, data collection and analysis methods, and interpretation and reporting of results (Simundić, 2013, 13-14). Therefore, it is crucial for researchers to minimize research bias and ensure the transparency and credibility of the research process.

In the study, reflexivity was employed by the researcher to mitigate the potential impact of their own biases. Reflexivity refers to the practice of researchers being aware of their own beliefs, values, and attitudes, and how they may influence their study, as well as their research methods (Johnson et al., 2020, 139; Payne & Payne, 2004, 191). In this process, the researcher reflected on their own experiences, biases, and preconceptions to ensure that they did not unduly influence the findings of the research. The

researcher also used rigorous data collection procedures, such as structured data collection instruments and multiple data sources, triangulated their data sources, and sought input from peers and mentors to increase the trustworthiness and validity of the findings.

It is also important to consider the generalizability of research in any study, as it determines the extent to which the findings can apply to other populations, settings, or contexts beyond the specific sample and study design used. A study with high generalizability has findings that can be generalized beyond the specific sample or context in which the study was conducted, while a study with low generalizability has findings that are limited to the specific sample or context and cannot be easily applied to other populations or settings (Johnson, 1997). A potential limitation of the present study was the small sample size, which can limit the generalizability of the findings. To address this limitation, however, the study employed a purposeful and diverse sampling method for each method of data collection, including semi-structured interviews and online surveys, with participants representing a range of experiences and perspectives. The sample was diverse in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, and the interview questions were open-ended and flexible, allowing participants to share their experiences and perspectives in their own words. Despite the limitations of the sample size, the purposeful and diverse sampling method and the flexible interview approach helped to ensure the generalizability of the findings to a wider population of TikTok users and adult content creators.

The limitations of collecting data from a single platform like TikTok can also have implications for the generalizability of research findings. First, while the present study used purposeful and diverse sampling methods to maximize the representativeness of the findings, it is possible that the experiences and perspectives of individuals on other platforms or in regions not accessible to the researcher and therefore were not captured. Getting a representative sample of the sexual content creators is a challenging task because of the vast and unmeasurable size and boundaries of the population (Shaver, 2005, 296). This can create a biased understanding of the phenomenon being studied and limit the applicability of the findings to a broader population. Therefore, it is important for researchers to consider

these limitations and take steps to ensure that the data collection process is encompassing and inclusive to increase the validity and generalizability of their findings.

While the semi-structured interviews conducted virtually for this study offered a pragmatic and ethical approach, increasing accessibility while maintaining participant confidentiality, particularly crucial given the sensitive subject of sex work; the advantages of virtual interviews were balanced by certain challenges and potential limitations. First, the unpredictable nature of technical issues, including inconsistent internet connectivity and equipment malfunction, posed a risk to the smooth flow of interviews and the quality of collected data. To ease this, the researcher conducted thorough system checks and preparations before each interview, including stable internet connection, optimal audio-visual equipment performance, and availability of backup devices or alternative video communication platforms. Second, ensuring privacy and confidentiality within a virtual environment brought up additional considerations. Risks like unauthorized access, hacking, or non-consensual recording and sharing of interviews were mitigated through stringent security measures. The researcher briefed participants about study procedures and inherent risks, emphasizing the commitment to uphold confidentiality and anonymity. Video conferencing platforms were selected based on their reputation for security, and features like end-to-end encryption and password protection were deployed to minimize potential breaches.

Building a strong rapport and fostering trust with participants were also of paramount importance but posed their own unique challenges within a virtual setting. The lack of physical presence and the limited availability of non-verbal cues risked compromising the depth and richness of participant responses. To bridge this digital divide, the researcher implemented strategies to create a comfortable and engaging interview environment. Initiatives included engaging in casual conversation prior to formal interview commencement, practicing active listening, and using visual aids or prompts for a more interactive dialogue. Despite the inherent challenges of a virtual semi-structured interview format, it emerged as an effective tool for this study. The interviews provided valuable insights that were used to facilitate important debates regarding platform politics and governance. As a result, the researchers

gained a deeper understanding of the creation of sexual content inside TikTok's content governance ecosystem.

The adopted methodology for video content analysis in this study involved a systematic compilation of coded TikTok videos and their associated themes. However, it is important to acknowledge that this approach also had certain inherent limitations. The subjective orientation of qualitative research introduces a basic limitation that potentially impacts the consistency and objectivity of the collected data. This means that the researcher's individual perspectives, experiences, and inherent biases could have swayed the interpretation of the data.

In order to mitigate the impact of this subjectivity, this research adhered to a disciplined approach towards the analysis process. This involved a meticulous categorization of data, iterative coding rounds, and continuous evaluative review stages to provide a check on bias and enhance the integrity of the data interpretation. Further, the employed sampling process carries potential biases. Specifically, the selection bias introduced through non-random, purposive, and snowball sampling techniques could raise questions about the study's applicability. The risk lies in potentially overlooking the insights from creators who are not openly subject to censorship or moderation on TikTok. Last, the reliance on TikTok's own delineation of prohibited sexual content in formulating the typology and sampling criteria may have inadvertently skewed the sample representation for this method. To counterbalance these biases, the researcher adopted a methodical approach to the sampling process. This process encompassed the use of diverse user profiles and a consistent method for selecting videos based on the established typology, thus working towards a more encompassing and representative sample.

The method of video content analysis employed in this study faced technical challenges; once again, namely stemming from the ephemeral subject research challenge. This issue posed threats to the integrity and stability of the data collected for this study, as it created an unstable and continuously shifting dataset. Consequently, the analysis was complicated as the recurring disappearance of content disrupted the continuity of data, potentially leading to valuable data points being lost, overlooked, or misrepresented. To mitigate this challenge and ensure as complete a dataset as possible, the researcher

used tools capable of exporting videos from the platform, effectively creating a stable record of the data that could be analyzed consistently. This approach offered a solution to disappearing content, as it allowed the researcher to maintain a persistent record of the videos in their original form, preserving essential data that could have otherwise been lost. However, this approach was not without its own set of challenges. First, recording videos was time-consuming and required constant vigilance to ensure all relevant content was captured before it potentially disappeared. This strategy did not completely erase data instability, as it could not capture changes to the video comments or user reactions over time, both of which could provide crucial contextual information.

Another notable limitation of the video content analysis method employed stemmed from its reliance on the functioning of the TikTok algorithm to locate the content to be analyzed. The platform's algorithm, known for its complex and somewhat opaque nature, could introduce selection bias, potentially skewing the types of videos captured and consequently influencing the research findings. The algorithm's structure is tailored to show content that aligns with the user's past viewing and interaction history, so it may not uniformly present all relevant content or creators. To counteract this limitation, the researcher implemented several strategies. First, to dilute the personalization effect of the algorithm, multiple user profiles were used for data collection. This approach aimed to diversify the range of content surfaced by the algorithm, increasing the likelihood of capturing a more encompassing representation of TikTok's sex-content creator community.

Second, the researcher employed a broad and persistent searching approach, systematically scanning an array of keywords, trending topics, and creator profiles to ensure a diverse cross-section of relevant content was collected. Additionally, a conscious effort was made to engage with a variety of videos from different creators, intentionally disrupting the algorithm's reinforcement loop. This was supplemented by the use of manual search functions, to locate content and creators beyond those recommended by the algorithm. However, it's important to note that while these methods sought to mitigate the influence of the TikTok algorithm, it could not be eliminated. The platform's algorithmic structure is an inherent aspect of its functionality, and any research conducted on the platform will

inevitably be influenced by it to some extent. Thus, it's essential to interpret the findings of this study considering this potential source of bias.

Importantly, this study contemplated various approaches for video content analysis, including the potential of hashtags as a defining or sampling strategy. While this method is indeed fruitful for some social media investigations, it was ultimately deemed unsuitable for this research context, where the studied creators often implement strategies to subtly veil their content. A noteworthy segment of the sex-content creators, especially those actively partaking in the sex work industry, tend to advise against the use of hashtags. Their hesitancy towards this technical feature poses a challenge to a hashtag-centric sampling strategy, underscoring the method's inadequacy for this specific study. Moreover, the study needed to account for the unique risks faced by sex-content creators on TikTok and in their real-world experiences. These challenges encompass a broad spectrum—from social stigmatization and gender-based violence to the likelihood of amplified scrutiny and harassment threats. Employing hashtags as a tool for data collection might inadvertently enhance the visibility of these creators, thereby escalating the scrutiny they face. Such increased visibility could alter their content creation behaviour and consequently introduce bias into the collected data. In light of these considerations, the researcher elected a more understated approach that prioritized the examination of the content itself over the associated tags. This subtle strategy offered a more nuanced understanding of the creators' experiences without exacerbating the risks they already confront. Notwithstanding these constraints, the utilisation of video content analysis facilitated the acquisition of an in-depth understanding of the content produced by sexual content creators on TikTok, as well as their strategies for navigating the platform’s politics and governance.

Finally, in discussing the limitations of the observation method employed in this study, it is important to address the inherent constraints and considerations associated with using publicly available data from TikTok and other social media platforms. Using publicly available data in this study for observation data collection raises important ethical considerations regarding privacy, consent, and the potential for harm to the individuals whose data is being analyzed. While the public nature of the data may not require informed consent, it is essential to recognize the potential impact of the research on the

individuals and communities being studied. To address these concerns, the researcher carefully considered issues of confidentiality, privacy, informed consent, and the potential for stigmatization or harm to the creators of the content. Measures were taken to avoid using identifying information in the analysis and to minimize the potential for harm or negative consequences for the individuals involved. The researcher adhered to the terms of service of the platform and only collected and analyzed publicly available data that was accessible to anyone with an internet connection. By implementing these precautions, the researcher aimed to minimize potential ethical risks associated with using publicly available data.

Using publicly available data for observation introduced limitations in terms of the depth and context of the observed content. Since the observation was restricted to what was publicly accessible, there is a possibility that the researcher may not have captured the complete range of experiences, perspectives, and behaviours of the creators. For instance, the researcher did not have access to the creators' paid-subscription content on other platforms, which may have provided valuable insights into their content creation strategies, audience interactions, and revenue generation. This limitation narrows analysis and potentially overlooks important aspects of the creators' online activities that could have contributed to a more in-depth understanding of their practices.

Another example of the limitations associated with using publicly available data for the observation method is the potential lack of contextual information. The absence of contextual details such as the creators' offline lives, their motivations behind content creation, and their personal circumstances might hinder a nuanced interpretation of their online behaviours and interactions. For instance, understanding the intersection of their online presence with their offline identities and experiences could provide valuable insights into how their content creation is influenced by broader social, cultural, and economic factors. The lack of contextual information restricts the researcher's ability to fully comprehend the underlying motivations and contextual nuances driving the observed behaviours. Furthermore, the reliance on publicly available data may limit the researcher's ability to capture the dynamic nature of the creators' online activities. The data represents a snapshot in time and may not reflect the evolution or

changes in the creators' content, strategies, or interactions. For example, if a creator made significant shifts in their content style, audience engagement strategies, or platform usage patterns after the data collection period, those developments may not be captured in the analysis. This limitation diminishes the temporal dimension of the research and may restrict the researcher's ability to explore the creators' growth, adaptation, or response to evolving circumstances.

Besides the utilization of publicly available data for the observation method, it is crucial to recognize that the researcher's subjective position and potential biases can introduce limitations to the observation. The researcher's own experiences, perspectives, and preconceived notions may inadvertently influence the interpretation and analysis of the observed content. To address and mitigate these limitations, the researcher implemented a rigorous reflexive approach throughout the study. This approach involved ongoing critical self-reflection, where the researcher consciously examined their own biases, assumptions, and positionality in relation to the research topic and participants. By maintaining a reflexive stance, the researcher aimed to minimize the impact of their subjectivity on the interpretation of the observed data and enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study's findings. This reflexive practice also allowed the researcher to identify and acknowledge any potential biases that might have influenced the data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

4.3.c. Reliability and Validity

In this study, multiple measures were employed to enhance the reliability and validity, with a key aspect being the use of triangulation as a method of analysis. Triangulation, in research analysis, involves the use of multiple data sources, methods, or perspectives to corroborate and validate findings. By integrating different data collection methods, such as semi-structured interviews, video content analysis, and participant observation, the study aimed to strengthen the reliability and validity of the research findings. The utilisation of triangulation enhances the depth and breadth of comprehension regarding the phenomena being examined, while also addressing the constraints inherent in singular research methodologies. The use of triangulation addresses the limitations of individual methods by allowing for

the cross-verification and validation of findings across different data sources. Each method has its own strengths and weaknesses, and by comparing and contrasting the results obtained from interviews, video content analysis, and observation, researchers can identify areas of convergence and divergence. When similar patterns or themes emerge from different methods, it strengthens the validity and reliability of the findings, reducing the likelihood of bias or idiosyncrasies specific to a single method. Furthermore, triangulation helps mitigate subjectivity and bias that may be present in individual methods. For example, in interviews, the researcher's own biases and perspectives may influence the data collection and interpretation. However, by complementing interviews with video content analysis and observation, which rely on the analysis of publicly available data, the potential for bias is minimized. Integrating these methods provides a more balanced and multifaceted perspective, enhancing the credibility of the findings.

Triangulation also allows for a deeper understanding of the research topic by capturing different facets of the phenomenon under investigation. Interviews provide rich qualitative data on the experiences and perspectives of participants, while video content analysis and observation offer qualitative insights into the content produced and behaviours exhibited. By combining these different data sources, the researcher could gain a better appreciation of the complexities and nuances of the research topic, leading to more nuanced and insightful conclusions. Moreover, triangulation helps address the limitations of individual methods by providing a means to mitigate biases and increase the overall reliability and validity of the study. By employing multiple data collection methods, the study increases the representativeness of the data, as different methods provide different perspectives on the research topic. This helps to ensure that the study's findings are not limited to a single viewpoint or perspective and are more reflective of the reality being studied. Additionally, each data collection method has its own strengths and limitations, and the use of multiple methods helps to offset any weaknesses in any one method.

Besides triangulation, several other measures were implemented to enhance the reliability and validity of the study: first, rigorous and systematic data collection procedures were followed to enhance the reliability and validity of the study. Clear protocols and guidelines were established for each data

collection method, ensuring consistency and standardization across the study. For instance, in the semi-structured interviews, a detailed interview guide was developed, containing a predetermined set of questions that were asked to all participants. This standardized approach enabled comparability across participants and minimized the potential for interviewer bias or variation in data collection. Similarly, in the video content analysis, a coding framework was created, including explicit definitions and criteria for coding different themes and categories. This framework served as a guide for the coding process, ensuring consistency and facilitating the coding process. By adhering to clear protocols, employing a coding framework, and maintaining consistency in data collection and analysis procedures, the study aimed to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings.

Second, the study employed purposeful sampling techniques to deliberately select a diverse range of participants, thereby ensuring the validity and representativeness of the findings within the context of the target population. The study endeavoured to attain a full grasp of the research topic by actively finding, observing, and recruiting individuals possessing diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. This deliberate sampling strategy increased the external validity of the study, as the findings were more likely to apply to a broader population. Similarly, careful subject sampling for observation and content sampling for analysis contributed to the reliability and validity of the study. The selection of subjects for observation encompassed a wide range of behaviours, characteristics, and contexts relevant to the research topic. This diverse subject sampling approach enhanced the internal validity of the findings by capturing the richness and complexity of the phenomenon under investigation. A systematic approach was employed to select a representative sample of content that accurately reflected the scope and nature of the research topic. The study enhanced the credibility and reliability of the findings by ensuring that the sampled content encompassed a diverse range of important themes, perspectives, and features, so providing an in-depth view of the phenomena.

4.3.d. Ethical Considerations

The study of sexual content creators on TikTok presents a range of unique ethical challenges that necessitate careful navigation and proactive measures. First and foremost, in developing the ethical framework for this study, a critical consideration arose regarding the treatment of sexual content creators within the research context. Given the nature of their content, the question emerged as to whether these individuals should be uniformly categorized as sex workers. While some sexual content creators may indeed engage in activities akin to sex work, it is important to recognize that not all creators fit this classification; for instance, certain professionals such as doctors creating educational content on sexual health are unlikely to categorize themselves under this designation. To navigate this complexity with sensitivity and respect, a nuanced approach was adopted, which prioritized the protection of all participants. Therefore, in line with ethical principles and to ensure the utmost confidentiality and dignity for all involved, a decision was made to treat all participants with the same level of consideration as sex workers, acknowledging the potential vulnerabilities and stigmatization they may face within their respective communities. This approach aimed to uphold the rights and well-being of all participants while maintaining the integrity of the research process.

Sex workers are a marginalized and stigmatized group that is often subjected to stigmatization, marginalization, discrimination, violence, and exploitation both in an offline and online setting (McDonald et al., 2021; Are & Paasonen, 2021; Knight, 2022; Benoit & Unsworth, 2022). Given the societal stigma and legal ramifications associated with sex work, the risk associated with this research is considerably higher, because breaches in ethics in sex work research can cause significant harm to individual sex workers by putting them at higher risk for violence, discrimination, and legal repercussions. Ethical research with individuals who are employed in this type of work, therefore, required a unique approach that acknowledges and addresses their challenges, while respecting their autonomy, privacy, and protecting their rights.

To ensure the highest ethical standards were met, the researcher applied an ethical framework derived from comprehensive consultations with the existing literature on ethical considerations in

research with sex workers within social media contexts (Are & Paasonen, 2021; Benoit et al., 2017; Chant, 2018; Ferris et al., 2021). By drawing upon this body of knowledge and other sources, the framework was designed to address the nuanced complexities inherent in studying sexual content creators, recognizing their distinct challenges and vulnerabilities within digital platforms. Key principles from this literature, such as the importance of informed consent, confidentiality, and minimizing harm, were integrated into the research methodology. Moreover, the framework facilitated an understanding of power dynamics and structural inequalities that may impact participants' autonomy and agency, guiding the researcher in fostering an environment of respect and trust throughout the study process. Additionally, considerations of intersectionality and the diverse identities within the sexual content creator community were taken into account, ensuring a nuanced and inclusive approach.

A key ethical consideration in research with any vulnerable population is the potential for harm to participants. This includes physical, emotional, and social harm, as well as risks related to confidentiality, privacy, and power dynamics. Given the societal stigma and legal ramifications associated with sex work, breaches in ethics can negatively impact individual sex workers, putting them at higher risk for violence, discrimination, and legal repercussions. To address these risks, the researcher took extra care to ensure the privacy and security of potential participants, using secure communication channels, allowing pseudonyms or anonymous accounts, and taking precautions to protect their personal information. No identifiable information, including participant names or likenesses, was disclosed in any images presented within the results and findings. Furthermore, all screenshots featured in the findings were meticulously anonymized by obfuscating usernames and blurring any visible faces to ensure the privacy and protection of individuals involved.

In light of the unique challenges and vulnerabilities encountered by sexual content creators, the researcher placed significant emphasis on the ethical considerations surrounding participants' informed consent, the dynamics of power, and the risks of stigma, discrimination, potential harm, or exploitation. This conscientious approach underscored the need for a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between societal perceptions and the lived realities of those involved in sex work. Building on this

foundation, the researcher's comprehension of the societal biases and stereotypes commonly associated with sex work was deeply enriched by an extensive review of literature pertaining to the sex work industry. This scholarly exploration shed light on the widespread misconceptions and stigmas embedded within and beyond the academic sphere, concerning this line of work.

To further refine this understanding, the researcher actively sought out diverse perspectives through both online and face-to-face dialogues and consultations with subject matter experts, advocacy organizations, and individuals who have firsthand experience in the realm of sex work. These interactions offered invaluable insights into the everyday challenges and systemic prejudices faced by sexual content creators. Armed with this knowledge, the researcher was determined to mitigate the potential risks of reinforcing or amplifying the stigmas tied to sex work. This commitment translated into a proactive strategy aimed at dismantling negative stereotypes and biases, by treating all study participants with the highest degree of respect, prioritizing their safety and well-being at every stage of the research, and facilitating access to supportive resources whenever necessary. Through these measures, the researcher strived to create an environment of trust and respect, fostering research setting that was both ethical and empathetic towards the sensitivities of the subject matter.

Moreover, because of this awareness, in conducting research on a vulnerable community like sex workers, it was imperative for the researcher to carefully consider the potential impact of the study on the participants and the broader community. The researcher had to be mindful of any social or cultural sensitivities related to the collected and analyzed content and take proactive steps to minimize potential harm that may result from reporting this information in the findings of the dissertation. The researcher needed to be cautious about revealing specific technical affordances used to bypass content moderation on public social media platforms. These strategies are often guarded industry secrets and disclosing them could increase the vulnerability of sex workers to exploitation by platforms or other individuals seeking to exploit their tactics. Therefore, the researcher handled any descriptions of circumvention strategies with care and responsibility, focusing on broader themes and practices rather than specific technical details that could harm or exploit online sex workers. By adopting this approach, the study provided valuable insights

into the challenges faced by online sex workers while safeguarding their well-being and minimizing the risk of further harm or exploitation.

The researcher took additional steps to reduce potential harm to participants while upholding ethical standards throughout the study. Ongoing attention was dedicated to ensuring participants were informed and empowered to make informed decisions about their participation. Throughout the study, rigorous precautions were taken to uphold ethical standards surrounding informed consent. Interview participants were provided with and signed informed consent forms, detailing the study's aims, methodologies, potential risks, and their rights, ensuring a thorough understanding of their participation. During observational phases, permission was obtained from all individuals under close scrutiny, reinforcing the study's commitment to ethical integrity and personal autonomy. For the video content analysis, consent was ensured by analyzing only publicly available content and, where possible, reaching out to content creators for permission, emphasizing respect for individual rights and the ethical use of digital content. By implementing these measures, the researcher prioritized ensuring that participants were fully aware of the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks involved.

Besides considering the ethics of conducting research in vulnerable communities and acknowledging the potential vulnerabilities of research subjects, this study also considered the associated risks involved in collecting and analyzing sensitive materials, particularly sexual content. The dissemination of findings based on such materials carries the potential to expose some participants to harm, including negative social consequences, retaliation, and even physical harm if their identities are revealed (Shaver, 2005). Consequently, it is crucial to address the challenges associated with data storage, confidentiality, and privacy to safeguard participants' well-being and protect their confidentiality. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the collection and analysis of sensitive material can perpetuate existing power imbalances between researchers and participants, potentially exposing participants to further exploitation (Chant, 2018, 43). Therefore, the examination and reporting of such content may contribute to stigmatization, reinforcing social biases and perpetuating harmful stereotypes (Shaver, 2005; McDonald et al., 2021).

In order to prioritize the protection of participants' identities and privacy, the researcher implemented several measures when working with individuals who contributed explicit content. One key strategy involved the use of pseudonyms or other methods of de-identification to mitigate potential harm or negative consequences stemming from their involvement in the study. The utilization of pseudonyms is a widely accepted practice in research, particularly when working with vulnerable populations, as it fosters an environment in which participants feel at ease and less vulnerable when sharing their experiences, leading to more candid and accurate data (Allen & Wiles, 2015, 3). Moreover, the use of pseudonyms helps to minimize the risk of harm by reducing the potential for personal information to be disclosed and thereby mitigating any associated negative consequences (McDonald et al., 2021, 388). However, it is important to acknowledge that using pseudonyms also presents certain challenges and limitations for the researcher, such as difficulties in managing and matching pseudonyms with participants' real identities. Nonetheless, considering the potential benefits and limitations, the decision to employ pseudonyms in this study was deemed the most suitable approach to minimize the risk of harm to participants and protect their confidentiality.

In addition to the aforementioned ethical considerations, the study recognized the significance of power dynamics in conducting research involving potential sex workers. Being mindful of this power dynamic, the researcher acknowledged the inherent authority of the researcher possessed over the participants. To address this, proactive steps were taken to establish a collaborative and respectful relationship with the participants, wherein their voices were valued, and they had the autonomy to withdraw from the study without facing any negative repercussions. The researcher strived to create an environment where participants felt empowered and respected throughout the research process. This involved open communication and transparency, ensuring that participants fully understood the study, as well as their rights as research participants.

In conclusion, in conducting this research the researcher was committed to upholding a meticulous and ethical methodology. Stringent measures were adopted throughout data collection and analysis to safeguard participant confidentiality and ensure the utmost respect for their contributions. The

presentation of findings was also carefully crafted to reflect a thoughtful and considerate approach towards participant experiences. By adhering to the highest ethical standards, this study aims to enrich our understanding of sexual content creators' experiences and autonomy, while protecting their welfare and minimizing any potential adverse effects.

4.4. Conclusion

The methodological design implemented in this study is pivotal for investigating into the complex dynamics of platform politics and governance, with a specific focus on sexual content within the TikTok ecosystem. The framework outlined in this chapter synergizes qualitative research techniques with a cross-disciplinary lens, meticulously integrating interviews, video content analyses, and participant observations. This methodical amalgamation is strategically crafted to dissect the intricate relationships among user autonomy, power structures, and expressive performance, particularly in the context of sexuality and corporeal politics. The endeavor extends beyond mere data collection; it aims to forge a classification typology for sexual content, thereby introducing theoretical constructs such as "sexual context collapse" and the "sexual content spectrum." These conceptual advancements promise to deepen the discourse on the multifaceted nature of sexual content and its regulation across digital platforms, offering fresh insights into this critical area of study.

In closing this chapter, it's imperative to acknowledge that the methodologies employed are more than just procedural choices; they are reflective of a deeper commitment to understanding the digital tapestry of human interactions and expressions. The rigorous approach adopted ensures a thorough exploration of the nuanced dynamics at play, providing a robust foundation for the forthcoming analysis. As we transition from methodology to findings, the insights garnered through this comprehensive methodological framework set the stage for an enriched discourse on the governance of digital spaces and the pivotal role of sexual content within these contexts. This study, therefore, not only contributes to the academic field but also offers practical implications for policymakers, platform developers, and the community of content creators navigating the ever-evolving landscape of social media.

Chapter 5: A Typology for the Sexual Context Spectrum

The findings presented in this chapter emerge from an in-depth analysis aimed at deciphering the complex tapestry of sexual content and creator governance on TikTok. The research meticulously examines the myriad forms and functions that such content assumes, revealing that sexual content on TikTok is not monolithic but exists along a vibrant continuum. This continuum spans various types of content, ranging from educational to advocative, entertaining, expressive, seductive, and community-based, each playing a unique role in shaping discussions around sex and sexuality on the platform. By exploring these diverse content types, this chapter lays the groundwork for understanding the nuanced ways in which sexual content is created, disseminated, and received within TikTok's digital ecosystem.

This chapter investigates the intricate dynamics of context within the spectrum of sexual content on TikTok, presenting an empirical investigation that brings to light the multifaceted ways that sexual content creators and communities interact with and navigate the platform's affordances and constraints. The chapter dissects a typological spectrum of sexual content categories present on TikTok, encompassing educational, entertaining, expressive, advocacy, and seductive forms. Each category contributes distinctively to the evolving discourse on topics like sexuality, sexual health, fetish, kink, and sex work, thereby enriching the platform's digital sexual landscape.

A central proposition of this chapter is the development of a typology of sexual content on TikTok, casting light on the platform’s politics and governance structures. This typology not only categorizes the different sexual contexts in content on TikTok, but also unravels the complexities inherent in the overlapping and interplay of different sexual content forms. This deep exploration enhances our comprehension of digital sexual expression and underscores the unique challenges faced by content creators in navigating the platform's governance framework. Moreover, the chapter's analysis, buttressed by detailed empirical examples derived from the research data, advances our understanding of the dynamics of sexual content on digital platforms like TikTok. It moves beyond mere categorization to probe into the broader dynamics of power, agency, and control within sex-based online communities.

This exploration offers a critical lens through which we can better understand digital sexuality, not just as a topic of content creation but as a complex interplay of individual expression, community norms, and platform regulations.

The findings and discussions presented here shed light on the nuanced realities of these digital spaces, providing a contribution to the academic discourse on digital sexual expression and platform governance. Having navigated the terrains of various communities in this research, a pivotal concern emerged during the study regarding the experiences, perceptions, and influences of sexual content creators on TikTok. It became clear that content moderation and platform governance are often central to these experiences, perceptions, and influences. These facets of digital interaction play a decisive role in shaping the landscape within which creators operate, significantly impacting how they produce, present, and perceive their content. This realization led to a deeper exploration of the phenomenon of 'sexual context collapse' in content creation, consumption, and moderation. The study revealed that the rigid frameworks of content moderation and platform governance policies often fail to accommodate the diverse and nuanced contexts of sexual content, leading to an oversimplification or 'collapse' of these contexts. This collapse not only distorts the multifaceted nature of sexual expression on TikTok but also imposes significant limitations on the creators' ability to convey their narratives authentically, thereby affecting the broader ecosystem of digital sexual expression.

'Sexual context collapse' is understood as the process where the diverse array of sexual contexts within digital content are condensed into a singular, oversimplified narrative. In digital content, 'context' serves as an interpretative socio-technical framework that shapes the content's meaning, reception, and impact. It encompasses not just the immediate environment of content creation and consumption but also the broader cultural, social, political, and economic factors influencing its interpretation and significance. With sexual content, 'context' includes elements such as the creator's intent, consent of involved parties, platform norms and affordances, audience understanding of sexuality, societal views on sexual expression, and other context-specific factors. Thus, within content creation, 'sexual context' can be defined as the unique amalgamation of factors like intent, consent, platform norms, audience

interpretation, and societal attitudes that collectively determine the perception and impact of sexual content in digital spaces.

Why does sexual context collapse occur? The complex and varied sexual contexts in social content, when reduced to a singular narrative, often occur due to content moderation policies and practices that tend to oversimplify sexual contexts into a homogenized framework. For instance, TikTok's community guidelines strictly prohibit sexually explicit or suggestive content. The phrasing of their policies often fails to distinguish between the different contexts of sexual content adequately. As a result, a post promoting sexual education and safe practices, for example, might be treated similarly to explicit pornographic content--despite significant differences in intent and circumstance. The ambiguity in these guidelines, frequently tilted towards maintaining platforms' corporate interests, like brand safety or advertiser appeal, can lead to selective enforcement of content moderation policies (Roberts, 2019; Gillespie, 2018). This can result in the unfair suppression of content that challenges societal norms but is essential for fostering diverse sexual narratives. For instance, content addressing queer sexuality, women's reproductive health, or body positivity might be marginalized or removed due to such selective enforcement. Likewise, expressions of non-traditional sexual identities or practices, such as narratives about BDSM, polyamory, or non-binary genders, may be disproportionately affected under these overarching moderation policies.

As technology broadens the avenues for sexual expression, it unveils a spectrum of sexual narratives and identities that often remain obscured or suppressed in conventional societal settings. While this increased visibility can be empowering, it also exposes these narratives and identities to heightened scrutiny, monitoring, alienation, and stigma, frequently triggering societal and institutional efforts to control and regulate these expressions.

The ramifications of sexual context collapse on digital platforms like TikTok are both profound and multi-dimensional. Empirically, a primary consequence is the oversimplification of sexual content. This process effectively distills the broad spectrum of human sexual expressions and experiences into a binary framework, often dictated more by platform policies influenced by political and economic interests

than by the realities of human sexuality. Such oversimplification leads to a binary categorization of content as either 'explicit' or 'non-explicit,' thereby minimizing the rich diversity of sexual contexts and forcing them into a single, standardized category that aligns with rigid corporate moderation policies.

This collapse not only homogenizes sexual narratives and identities, but it also fuels a trend towards the commodification of sexual expression. This commodification is deeply rooted in the operational and economic logic of digital platforms, which prioritize content that attracts large audiences and drives revenue through advertising and user engagement. Market-driven content moderation policies often skew towards content that fits into conservative and marketable categories. This categorization is designed to cater to the broadest audience and, by extension, to advertisers who favor 'safe' and non-controversial content. As a result, a cycle emerges where content that conforms to these predefined norms is promoted and more frequently produced, perpetuating and reinforcing these standards. Meanwhile, the commodification process oversimplifies and repackages sexuality, transforming it from a complex, personal, and multifaceted aspect of human identity into a commodified product tailored for mass consumption.

Content that deviates from the dominant narrative of sexual acceptability on social media platforms, such as representations of marginalized sexual identities or explorations of intricate facets of human sexuality, often faces marginalization, deplatforming, or shadowbanning. Algorithms may limit the visibility of such content, reducing accessibility and interaction, based on prevailing political, economic, and societal narratives (Cobbe, 2021). This restriction denies platform audiences a comprehensive and authentic representation of human sexual diversity. Content creators, especially those producing sexual content, experience pressure to conform to these norms, altering the contexts and presentations of their work. They find themselves performing 'acceptability' to comply with moderation guidelines, which can infringe on their creative autonomy and impact their livelihoods, particularly for those relying on platform-based income.

Consequently, the limited representation and diversity stemming from sexual context collapse in platform governance and content moderation impede the development of a nuanced understanding of

sexuality among platform users. The absence of a sophisticated approach to sexual content moderation results in a simplified and distorted portrayal of human sexuality. This disparity between the multifaceted nature of human sexuality and its platformized representation reinforces narrow and unrepresentative narratives within society, diminishing the understanding of sexuality's complexity. In this context, the subtleties of sexual intentions, varying degrees of explicitness, and the intersections of sexual content with societal norms, audience expectations, and platform affordances are often overlooked or lost. This reductionist approach strips away the layered complexity intrinsic to human sexuality.

In light of these implications, advancing our understanding of sexual context collapse in content creation and moderation is crucial, and challenging it becomes imperative. A typological framework that recognizes and addresses the diverse nature of sexual contexts within digital content is necessary. This framework would not only facilitate a more inclusive comprehension of the sexual context spectrum but also serve as a vital tool for future research in the domains of platform governance and content moderation.

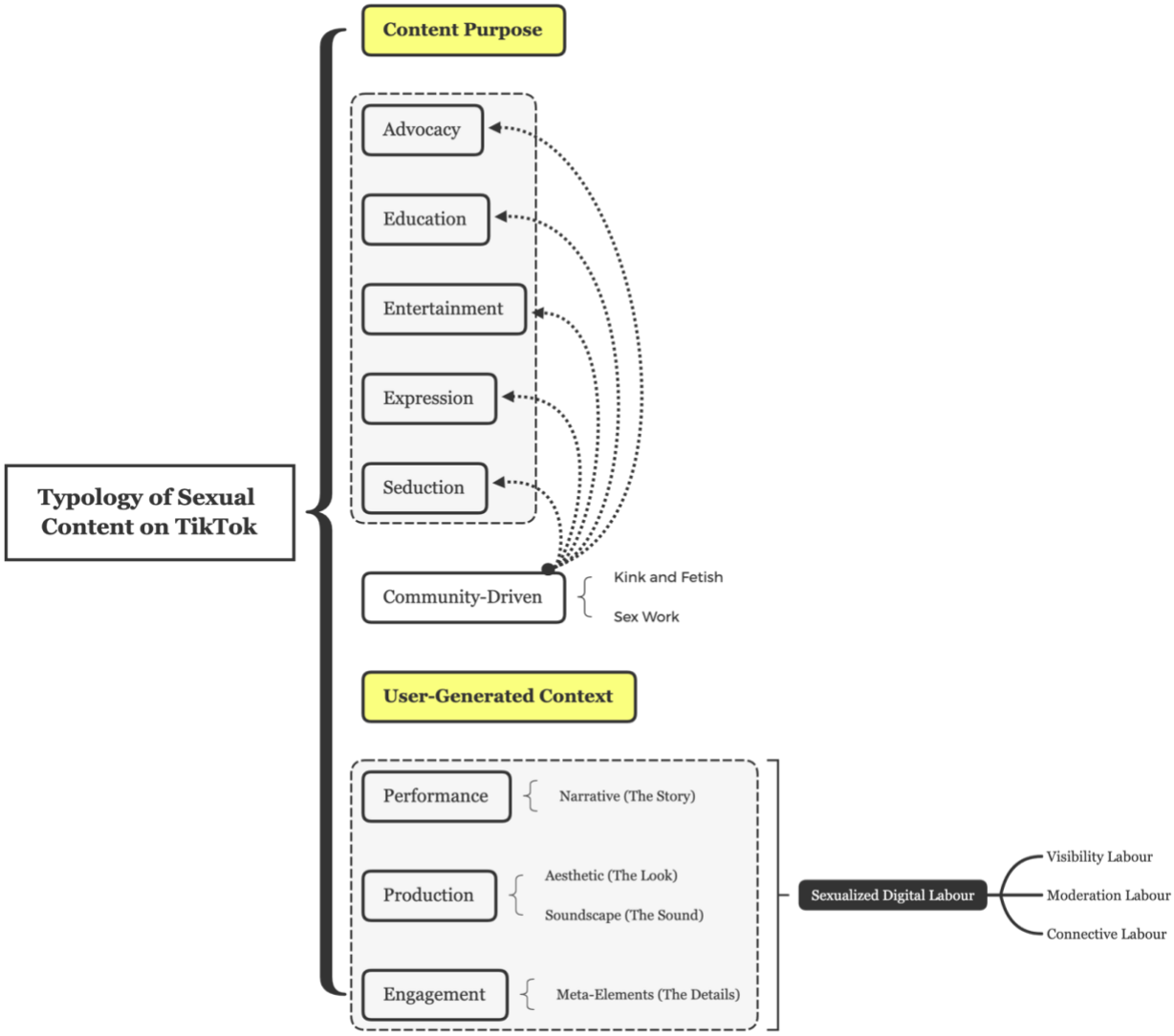
5.1. The Sexual Content Spectrum in Content on TikTok: A Typology

A typology can serve as an analytical tool that categorizes content into distinct classes based on shared characteristics. This methodical classification is crucial for addressing issues like sexual context collapse—a phenomenon where the multifaceted nature of sexual content is reduced to oversimplified categories by platform moderation policies. A typology allows researchers and policymakers to dissect and understand the complex layers of digital content, making it possible to identify and appreciate the diverse intentions, expressions, and communities behind each piece of content. This is particularly essential for sexual context, which encompasses a broad spectrum of forms and meanings, often subject to misinterpretation or undifferentiated treatment by content moderation systems.

The need for a typology tailored to sexual context in content on social media platforms arises from the critical challenges posed by sexual context collapse as previously described. Without a clear framework to understand sexual context in sexual content, the rich and varied landscapes of human sexual

expression become at risk of being homogenized, misclassified, or erased, leading to a diminished understanding and appreciation of such content by both users and platform algorithms. The creation of this typology is, therefore, an effort to theoretically and materially combat the oversimplification of sexual content. It aims to provide a more granular and nuanced perspective that acknowledges the complexity of sexual content and respects the diversity of the creators and their communities. By offering a structured approach to categorizing and analyzing sexual content, this typology presents a comprehensive model for understanding the intricacies of sexual expression on platforms like TikTok and informs more sensitive and informed governance and moderation practices.

To effectually understand the layers and complexities of sexual content on TikTok, this dissertation proposes a nuanced typology (outlined below) that encapsulates the diverse sexual contexts within the platform is essential. This typology, conceived not just to regulate or moderate creators but to facilitate a comprehensive understanding and responsible management of such content, is grounded in thorough empirical research. An iterative analysis method was employed to construct this framework, integrating cycles of observation, scrutiny, and classification. This process led to the refinement of the typology, with discernible patterns emerging within the dataset. The resulting conceptual framework maps the intricacies and breadth of sexual content in this digital landscape, offering insights grounded in empirical evidence.



This architecture of categorization is far from a mere listing of content types; it is a dynamic, interconnected schema that reflects the complexities and diversities of digital sexual expression. At the center of the typology is the *Content Purpose*, a concept that surpasses a simple classification by interlacing together various motivations behind content creation. The notion of *Advocacy* reflects a commitment to championing sexual rights, *Education* aims to disseminate crucial knowledge, *Entertainment* is crafted to captivate, *Expression* offers a window into personal identities, and *Seduction*

engages on a sensual plane. These facets, though distinct, are interwoven, painting a comprehensive picture of the creators' intentions on the platform.

Further complexity is introduced through the *Community-Driven Content* segment, which underscores the profound influence of collective identities and shared practices within specific communities, such as those formed around kink, fetish, and sex work. The essence of community-driven content lies in its roots; it is crafted from shared experiences, mutual understandings, and common goals. Within the kink and fetish communities, for example, content creation is not just an individual endeavor but a collective expression, manifesting shared narratives and values that strengthen communal bonds. The nuances of these communities are exemplified through their content, which often involves a complex interplay of symbols, language, and rituals that are deeply emblematic of their subculture. In the realm of sex work on TikTok, community-driven content can range from advocacy and awareness campaigns that seek to destigmatize the profession to educational content aimed at promoting safe practices and community solidarity. This content is a powerful conduit for influencing public perception and policy, as well as a means for community members to assert their identity and agency within a broader digital landscape.

The *User-Generated Context* is another critical element that reveals the multifaceted creative process behind content on TikTok. This component intricately weaves together the performative elements—be it the narrative arc of a video, the aesthetic choices made by the creator, or the soundscape that accompanies the visuals. It's within this framework that creators craft their performances, choosing settings, costumes, and dialogue that tell a story or convey a message. The production process is equally as involved, with careful consideration given to lighting, color palettes, and camera angles that enhance the visual impact of the content. Engagement extends beyond the content itself to the meta-elements that frame it: the captions, hashtags, and user interactions that provide context and invite audience participation. This user-generated context is not static; it evolves with trends, platform updates, and the creators' own growth and experimentation. It is a testament to the creators' ability to harness the platform's tools to craft content that resonates with their audience and provokes interaction.

The *Sexualized Digital Labour* dimension encapsulates the multifarious efforts that creators put into their content, which often goes unnoticed. This labour is multifaceted, encompassing the strategic efforts to increase content visibility amidst the crowded digital space, the meticulous adherence to ever-changing moderation policies, and the nurturing of community ties that bolster support and viewership. Visibility labour may involve creators engaging in research to understand algorithmic trends and optimize their content for discovery. Moderation labour demands a keen awareness of platform guidelines to ensure content remains accessible to audiences, a task that involves constant navigation of the grey areas of policy interpretation. Connective labour is equally crucial; it is about building a rapport with the audience, responding to comments, and fostering a sense of community around their content. This digital labour is essential to the creators' success and sustainability on the platform, representing a significant investment of time, creativity, and emotional energy. Together, these forms of labour constitute the backbone of the digital content ecosystem, driving the creation, distribution, and reception of content within the expansive realm of TikTok.

Together, these components of the typology can offer a profound insight into the intricate dance between creators' agency and platform governance. It highlights the sophisticated strategies that content creators employ to navigate the terrain of platform governance, all the while casting light on the limitations inherent in current content moderation systems. This framework not only dissects the complexities of sexual content but also advocates for content moderation practices that respect the creators' intentions and the cultural nuances of their communities. Thus, this typology is not merely a framework but a call for more discerning and culturally attuned governance of creatorship on digital platforms, like TikTok. It is an academic endeavor to understand better and support the rich spectrum of sexual expression in the digital age.

Therefore, the typology of sexual content on TikTok is structured to capture the multifaceted reality of digital expression, offering a holistic categorization that mirrors the empirical complexities observed within the platform. At its core, the structure is designed to reflect the diverse intentions behind content creation, ranging from advocacy and education to entertainment, personal expression, and

seduction. Each category is empirically derived from patterns observed in content analysis, ensuring that the typology is grounded in actual user behavior and platform trends. *Community-Driven* Content acknowledges the shared identities and collective practices that give rise to specialized content within kink, fetish, and sex work communities. This distinction is crucial for understanding the nuances of content that is not only individually crafted but is also a product of collective cultural production. The *User-Generated Context* category further dissects the creative process into performance, production, and engagement, informed by data on how creators craft their narratives, aesthetic choices, and audience interaction strategies. This segmentation is essential for capturing the creators' labor and the audience's reception, thus providing a comprehensive view of content creation from inception to consumption. The incorporation of *Sexualized Digital Labour* into the typology is supported by data on the creators' efforts to navigate platform algorithms, adhere to moderation policies, and foster community connections, which are all critical to content visibility and success on the platform.

By structuring the typology in this way, it aligns with the empirical evidence gathered from content analyses, user interaction studies, and creator interviews. It provides a framework that not only categorizes content based on observable characteristics but also considers the underlying dynamics of content creation and dissemination. This structure allows for an in-depth understanding of the political and governance aspects of sexual content on TikTok, reflecting the actual practices of content moderation and the strategies employed by creators to adapt to and influence these processes. The typology's empirical grounding ensures that it is reflective of the lived realities of TikTok users and the operational mechanisms of the platform, making it a robust tool for analyzing the digital landscape of sexual content.

The next sections will provide a detailed analysis of each of these categories identified within the above typology. In-depth discussions on each category will illuminate the unique experiences, challenges, and adaptive strategies of creators operating within these realms of sexual content.

5.2. General Sexual Content: Education, Entertainment, Advocacy, Expression, and Seduction

5.2.a. Informative and Educational Sexual Content: Sexual Education

Sexual education content on TikTok forms a vital category within the wider spectrum of sexual content on the platform, embodying a distinct emphasis on disseminating educational and informational materials related to diverse aspects of human sexuality. It refers to content that is primarily informative and educational; and encompasses a wide range of topics from sexual health, consent, safe sex practices, and anatomical knowledge to debunking sexual myths, breaking down stigmas, and fostering open conversations about sexual wellbeing. This content plays a pivotal role in enhancing user understanding, awareness, and knowledge about sexuality, making it a key source of information for users who may lack other accessible resources. Thus, sexual education content on TikTok bridges the gap between knowledge and accessibility, using the platform's reach and interactive features to communicate critical information about sexuality in a compelling, digestible, and engaging manner.

Sex education content on TikTok is distinguished not only by its content performance diversity but also by the vast range of individuals and entities behind its dissemination. Analytical observations from the research findings spotlight an intricate matrix of contributors in this domain. Within the healthcare sphere, contributions come from a myriad of professionals such as gynecologists, urologists, sexual health nurses, endocrinologists, psychiatrists specializing in sexual disorders, public health experts focusing on sexually transmitted infections and diseases, and more. From the therapeutic domain, the platform features contributions from licensed marriage and family therapists specializing in intimacy, cognitive-behavioral therapists addressing sexual anxieties, psychosexual therapists exploring deep-seated issues, and somatic sex therapists integrating body and mind techniques. Alongside healthcare professionals and sex therapists, there's a notable presence of LGBTQ+ activists who emphasize inclusivity and representation in sexual narratives. Relationship experts and counselors shed light on intimate partner dynamics, consent, and communication. Furthermore, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and health agencies frequently contribute, sharing resources, raising awareness about sexual

health issues, and combating misinformation. Schools and educational institutions, in their bid to stay relevant with younger audiences, are also making their foray onto the platform, offering bite-sized modules on sexual education. Meanwhile, peer educators—often younger TikTokers—share relatable content about navigating sexual experiences during adolescence. Individuals from marginalized communities share personal narratives, emphasizing intersectionality in sexual experiences. Even artists and illustrators have carved a niche, using visual storytelling to elucidate complex sexual health topics.

Such a kaleidoscope of contributors reflects TikTok's potential as a democratized platform for sex education. Their collective contributions, drawing from varied expertise and lived experiences, make the platform a vibrant hub for comprehensive, inclusive, and multi-dimensional sexual education, thereby elevating TikTok's stature as a pivotal tool for modern-day sex education. This vibrancy is reflected in the array of topics covered within this category of content, which are as vast as it is critical. Content creators in this category masterfully weave complex topics like sexual health education, consent and communication, LGBTQ+ education and awareness, sexual pleasure and intimacy, sex-positive culture and empowerment, relationships and communication, sexual identity and gender expression information, and cultural diversity perspectives on sex into easily digestible and engaging narratives. These creators—most often in a non-erotic sexual context — tackle crucial facets of human sexuality that are often overlooked or insufficiently addressed in mainstream education. Creators in this category, for instance, leverage the platform's unique features and dynamics to present their content in a way that not only educates but also captivates, thereby contributing to the successful propagation of sexual education content in this digital sphere.

For instance, one creator observed in this field who is also a gynecologist uses the platform to dispense valuable sexual health education. She skillfully uses the platform's features, such as the short-form video format and sound overlays, to create captivating and humorous, educational content about contraception, STDs, menstruation, and more. Another creator, a non-binary sex educator, navigates the sexual context collapse by deploying coded language, symbolic visuals, and humour to discuss LGBTQ+ sexual health and safe sex practices while staying within TikTok's guidelines. Similarly, many

2SLGBTQ+ creators were observed sharing personal experiences with PrEP (a medication used to prevent HIV), offering peer education and sharing personal narratives, providing a relatable lens to disseminate critical sexual health information. These creators, in many ways, highlight the innovative methods in which sexual education is being propagated within the TikTok digital sphere, leveraging the platform's unique features and community dynamics to both educate and entertain.

In many ways, sexual education on TikTok is emblematic of a broader digital pedagogical evolution that is distinctively grounded in the platform's technical affordances and user-driven dynamics. Analyzing the data reveals a trend where interactivity isn't just supplementary but foundational to the content's pedagogical structure. Educators don't merely present information; they actively harness features like comments, duets, and live sessions to contextualize, expand, and reciprocate. The comments section, for instance, isn't just a feedback loop but serves as a real-time gauge of audience comprehension, where educators systematically address misconceptions and fill knowledge gaps, adapting their content based on empirical observations of user responses. Similarly, the utilization of duet and stitch functionalities extends beyond mere dialogue, presenting a tapestry of interlinked educational narratives and peer-review. Live streams recreate synchronous learning environments, often echoing traditional classroom settings but with a digital twist. This empirically observed commitment to peer-reviewed, context-sensitive information sharing, coupled with the strategic use of TikTok's tools, not only elevates the learning experience but also evidences the adaptability of modern educators to digital platforms. Consequently, the manner in which sexual education unfolds on TikTok offers valuable insights into the intersections of platform affordances, user engagement, and content efficacy in the digital age.

The empirical data reveals a significant shift in the pedagogical dynamics of sexual education, most saliently in the evolution of patient-doctor interactions on TikTok. This isn't just a matter of information transition but signifies a deeper restructuring of foundational interpersonal dynamics that have historically defined one's navigation of sex, sexual health, and gender identity. Central to this shift is the emergence of parasocial relationships with healthcare professionals. These, although unilateral, engender a perceived intimacy previously absent in traditional medical contexts. TikTok's functionalities,

such as direct messaging and live interactions, have catalyzed this sense of virtual proximity, moving beyond mere enhancements to fundamentally redefine patient-professional engagements. In a broader analytical context, this positions digital platforms not as auxiliary tools, but as primary conduits in shaping an individual's sexual self-awareness. While TikTok has commendably democratized access to information, especially in regions where open discourse on sexuality is constrained, it's vital to approach this progression with a degree of caution. The potential for misinformation and concerns around user privacy remain significant challenges to be addressed.

The proliferation of educational sexual content on TikTok introduces both opportunities and challenges for its vast user base. While the platform serves as an invaluable conduit connecting users to reputable sexual health education resources and trusted medical health professionals, it simultaneously becomes a breeding ground for disinformation. This duality is particularly concerning given the platform's rapid dissemination capabilities. Although many users benefit from evidence-based, expert-backed insights, there remains a significant portion of content that eschews factual accuracy in favor of sensationalism, personal biases, or mere ignorance. Such misinformation, when unflagged and unchallenged, can perpetuate myths, misconceptions, and potentially harmful narratives about sexuality, thereby undermining the positive educational potential TikTok holds. Analyzing the implications of this dichotomy underscores the critical need for stringent content validation mechanisms and user literacy initiatives on the platform.

The research illuminated an intriguing linguistic adaptation within the educational and informative content on TikTok. To navigate TikTok's stringent content moderation policies, many creators, notably doctors and other healthcare professionals, often resorted to employing codewords, euphemisms, or even child-like language as a strategy to convey complex medical and sexual health issues. For instance, terms like "birds and bees," "down there," or utilizing symbols like 🍆 or 🍑 became prevalent proxies for more explicit sexual terminology. This linguistic adaptation, however, was not exclusive to medical professionals. It permeated the content spectrum: sex workers might refer to their profession as "nighttime companionship," sex shop owners might use "adult play toys" instead of explicit

product names, and even horse breeders, while discussing breeding processes, might use phrases like "special horse hugs." For example, some sexual education content creators addressed content moderation issues in their videos, aiming to educate their audience and foster awareness of the policies in place. One medical health professional made a video captioned “#RealDoctor trying to educate women gets blocked” stating:

> *“Hello, I am Dr. [redacted], and I'm sitting in a random operating room in Chicago, Illinois, and I just found out I got banned again by TikTok for saying the word “vagina”. I’m a board-certified OB GYN and I would show you my ID, but it says the hospital where I’m at work…. Anyways, we gotta stop and say look… It is time for us to normalize talking about vaginas. ….vagina, vagina, vagina, vagina. Come-on now people..vaginas unite!”*

Likewise, a radiologist operating a medical account shared:

> *“I’m pretty upset at TikTok right now. I posted this fun video yesterday called “Where’s the foreign body?” I asked you guys to look at an X-ray and guess if something was in the urethra or rectum. The video had five x-rays and it was removed for “adult nudity and sexual activity.” That’s happened before, but they’ve restored it, but this time they say my content violates applicable laws and cannot be restored. I showed you five x-rays, all like this *points to photo of x-rays* posted publicly on Medicalpedia. I wouldn’t do anything to violate HIPAA… I wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize my job. Someone just explain how an x-ray somehow violates nudity content? And now my account is at high risk of being restricted and my next violation could get me blocked. I’ve enjoyed posting medical content and fun radiology content for you guys… TikTok just has me pretty frustrated right now.*

This prevalent use of coded language, and the deplatforming of those who do not use it, highlights a broader phenomenon — the language of sex on TikTok has been distilled into a limited lexicon, constrained by the platform's moderation parameters. While such linguistic creativity can be viewed as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of the TikTok community, it also carries profound implications. The restriction and subsequent adaptation collapse the rich and varied language historically associated with human sexuality. By constraining the linguistic tools available to discuss and express intricate and nuanced aspects of sexuality, there's an inadvertent simplification of conversations around sex. This could potentially dilute the depth and breadth of discourse, leaving users with a narrower, perhaps even skewed, understanding of human sexuality. Yet, in the face of these challenges, the determination of sexual educators on TikTok remains unyielding. These creators persistently navigate the

platform's constraints, continuously innovating and adapting their content, all in an effort to ensure that their audience remains informed and educated about essential aspects of human sexuality.

Sexual education content on TikTok was characterized not only by a unique confluence of diverse creators and subject matter, but also by innovative content delivery techniques, marking its distinct identity in the broader context of sexual content on the platform. The analysis discovered a variety of content performance and production strategies employed by TikTok creators within the sexual education sphere. In terms of sexual health, numerous creators adeptly used humour and everyday scenarios to highlight the necessity of regular STI testing and contraception, thereby making these topics more approachable and less stigmatized. To illustrate the importance of consent, several creators produced skits or shared anecdotal experiences that showcased real-world instances of how consent should be appropriately sought and given. This creative approach helps to illuminate an often-misunderstood concept in an engaging and accessible way. A significant segment of creators dedicated their content to LGBTQ+ education and awareness, offering regular insights into different sexual orientations and gender identities. By debunking prevalent myths and advocating for acceptance and understanding, these creators are fostering a more inclusive digital space. As one 2SLGBTQ+ Sexual Lifestyle Content Creator put it:

> "*I try to make [content] fun and easy to understand. I use humour and everyday situations to talk about things like STI testing and contraception. It helps people feel more comfortable and less embarrassed about these things…Consent is really important for me, so I share real stories and examples to show how it works in different situations. I want to make it clear that consent should always be sought and given, and I try to make it relatable for my audience…And, I think it's important to educate people about different sexual orientations and gender identities. I try to share videos that challenge common misconceptions and provide information to promote acceptance and understanding. I want to use my platform to create a platform where everyone feels included and respected.*"

Within the analytical framework of this study, it was observed that discourses surrounding relationships, sexual pleasure, and intimacy emerged as prominent meta-thematic categories in this content genre. Notably, a subset of creators meticulously concentrated their content around female sexuality, advancing a more comprehensive discourse on sexual agency and satisfaction. This thematic trend signifies a more profound cultural pivot towards recognizing and acknowledging the intricacies of female sexual experience. A discernible pattern emerged wherein certain creators systematically championed a sex-

positive culture, intertwining themes of body positivity, self-affirmation, and sexual empowerment. This deliberate content strategy not only promotes individual empowerment but also fosters a broader environment of acceptance and inclusivity.

Parallelly, another salient content stratagem was the fostering of dialogues premised on relationships and effective communication. Through this lens, creators proactively advocated for healthier relational dynamics, adeptly spanning topics from conflict navigation to nuanced discussions on sexual fulfillment. Regarding sexual identity and gender expression, it was analytically noted that creators were not just disseminating information but were often embedding their personal journeys, rendering a more grounded and relatable perspective on these multifaceted topics. Significantly, the study further discerned a diverse array of creators elucidating cultural perspectives on sexuality, underscoring the importance of acknowledging and understanding the rich tapestry of cultural norms and practices intertwined with sexuality.

Amidst these positive content trends, however, the study also unveiled certain problematic undercurrents. The platform, while fostering positive discourses, simultaneously became a fertile ground for the reproduction of toxic narratives and misinformation. A discernible pattern emerged where creators perpetuated harmful stereotypes, reinforcing biased gender roles, or trivializing serious subjects related to sexual health and relationships. For instance, certain TikTok trends inadvertently endorsed toxic masculinity or propagated body shaming, disguising these problematic behaviors under the guise of humor or "relatable content." Moreover, the study identified instances where creators disseminated erroneous or overly simplified information about sexual health, presenting potential risks for impressionable audiences who might not cross-check the veracity of such claims. Some videos also perpetuated harmful myths, such as associating certain body types with sexual prowess, or suggesting that emotional intimacy can be achieved through superficial means. These findings underscore the double-edged nature of the platform: while it offers invaluable avenues for empowerment and education, it concurrently poses risks of reinforcing damaging stereotypes and disseminating misleading information.

Additionally, further complicating this genre is the intersection of sexual education and entertainment, prominently observed on TikTok, which has ushered in a"sex-edutainment" genre, blurring traditional content boundaries. For instance, TikTok videos might employ provocative dance sequences to elucidate the nuances of consent or utilize sensual animations to eroticize reproductive health intricacies. Within this "sex-edutainment" landscape, educational themes often serve as a veneer, permitting creators to sexualize content ostensibly for garnering attention. Historically, this trend of eroticizing conventionally desexualized contexts, such as medical settings or professional roles like nurses and doctors, isn't novel, and TikTok's content only reinforces this long-standing cultural phenomenon. On TikTok, this veneer of education frequently acts as a strategic maneuver, allowing creators to navigate the platform's content moderation guidelines, thereby introducing more risqué or controversial topics under the guise of pedagogy, and avoiding potential content takedowns or restrictions.

While some argue that such content primarily serves educational purposes, others perceive it as verging on explicit pornography (Zaneva et al., 2022). Leveraging eroticism within health education, as evidenced by Jones et al. (2020) and Fuentes et al. (2018), can augment viewer engagement and promote positive sexual well-being perceptions. Yet, as the "sex-edutainment" genre proliferates, it is crucial to rigorously scrutinize its intentionality and ramifications. Drawing from Döring (2021) and Setty (2022), the blurring lines between sexual allure, pornographic undertones, and educational content on platforms like TikTok demand an analytical probe. Moreover, this burgeoning content trend necessitates broader interrogations concerning the very definitions of pornography, as well as the challenges inherent in regulating such content amidst evolving paradigms of sexual health education, as outlined by Johnston (2017).

In conclusion, upon reflecting back to the broader typology of sexual content on TikTok, the genre of informative and educational sexual content stands out as a distinctive genre due to its foundational purpose: to educate and inform. While entertainment permeates much of TikTok's content, what demarcates this genre from mere amusement is its deliberate intent to convey knowledge on intricate subjects like sex, sexuality, sexual identity, and gender. Such content is not merely reactionary or trend-

driven; it's fundamentally proactive, aiming to fill knowledge gaps, challenge misconceptions, and foster nuanced understandings of human sexuality. As we delve deeper into TikTok's sexual content spectrum, it is crucial to recognize the merit of this genre. Beyond the allure of dynamic presentation lies a committed effort to enhance sexual literacy in the digital age, juxtaposing the platform's entertainment-driven ethos with a serious, educational undertone. This commitment to authenticity and instruction, despite the platform's ephemeral nature, underscores its unique position within the larger content mosaic.

5.2.b. Entertaining Sexual Content: Sexual Entertainment

TikTok, functioning as a platform, cultivates an attention economy, with its content primarily crafted to captivate and maintain viewer engagement through a diverse range of features, technical elements, and strategies. In this attention-drive environment, nearly all content aspires to entertain, providing bite-sized doses of amusement to the scrolling masses. The introduction of sexuality into this entertainment matrix presents a dynamic shift, however. While the appeal of eroticism, with its inherent ability to captivate an audience, is undeniable, TikTok's rendition of sexual entertainment isn't confined to just the erotic. Sexual themes on TikTok often interlace with humor, artistry, and creativity, transforming the subject of sexuality from merely arousing to multi-facetedly entertaining. Whether through comedic sketches highlighting the quirks of relationships or artistic portrayals of the human form, sexuality emerges not just as a subject but as a versatile tool for creators. This prevalence of entertainment in sexual content on TikTok, whether subtle or overt, influences its shape, reception, and resonance within the digital community, underscoring the importance of unpacking its multifarious dimensions.

For our purposes, “sexual entertainment content” on TikTok can be defined as a genre of content on the platform that employs a blend of both sexual and non-sexual themes to create a diverse range of performances and contexts with the primary intention of entertaining its audience. However, "sexual entertainment" is a multifaceted concept that necessitates a discerning examination beyond surface-level understandings. At its core, the term amalgamates two powerful domains: sexuality—a fundamental aspect of human experience, and entertainment—the act of providing or being provided with amusement

or enjoyment. From one angle, sexual entertainment can be interpreted through the erotic lens, where the content is designed to arouse or titillate its audience, offering a sensuous experience that intertwines with the aesthetics of pleasure. This form taps into the physiological and emotional dimensions of its audience, challenging societal taboos and affirming desires.

Conversely, on the non-erotic end of the spectrum, sexual entertainment can be a medium to approach sexuality with humor, artistry, or even educational undertones. Think of comedic sketches that spotlight the awkwardness of first dates or artistic performances that celebrate the beauty of the human form without necessarily invoking arousal. Another dimension worth noting is the intent versus perception dichotomy; what is crafted as non-erotic by creators might still be perceived erotically by some viewers, highlighting the subjectivity inherent in the concept. Thus, to fully grasp "sexual entertainment," one must appreciate its vast continuum—from the explicitly erotic to the implicitly sensual, from the deliberately evocative to the inadvertently provocative. This range underscores the complexity and diversity of how sexuality can be presented and consumed in the realm of entertainment.

On TikTok, the sexual entertainment genre seamlessly integrates elements like humor, satire, storytelling, visual aesthetics, interactive challenges and games, and cultural commentary, all threaded by entertaining, sex-related themes and narratives. Fundamentally, the purpose of this content isn't solely to spotlight sex or sexual activities—though they can be substantial components. Rather, sexuality is intricately interlaced into the content's broader tapestry, enriching it with dimensions of intrigue, humor, challenge, or reflection. As two creators explained during interviews:

> "*Sex can be a part of [it], but it's not the only thing that defines the content.*" (Sex Researcher)

> *"It's all about making people laugh or enjoy themselves while including sexual things in a fun way. For example, I use jokes or hints about sex to make people laugh. It's not really explicit or raunchy, but more like adding a little spice to keep things interesting. It's really about finding the right balance between expressing yourself but keeping it enjoyable for everyone."* (Sex Work Content Creator)

Therefore, the sexual entertainment category of the typology represents a distinct facet of sexual content on TikTok, characterized by its focus on entertainment and its creative incorporation of sex-related

themes within a broader performance context. Understanding these varied portrayals offers a clear window into the dynamics of sexual content, situated within the vast expanse of TikTok's attention-grabbing culture. The very essence of TikTok as a platform lies in its bite-sized, engaging content, and within the realm of sexual content, the entertainment genre is no exception. The manner in which sexuality is articulated on TikTok can be vastly multifaceted, especially when it becomes intertwined with entertainment objectives.

This encapsulates a range of purposes, performances, and contexts. At the forefront of the entertainment spectrum lies the sensual portrayal of sexual themes. Rather than explicit depictions, TikTok predominantly hosts content that is nuanced and evocative. For instance, a creator might film a sultry dance routine to a song with sensual undertones. Yet, the primary objective remains entertainment and artistic expression rather than pure sexual arousal. Such representations emphasize allure rather than explicitness. Additionally, sexual themes interwoven with comedic sketches are increasingly becoming a staple on TikTok. A recurrent example could be sketches highlighting the humorous pitfalls of modern dating, from ghosting to navigating dating apps. This comedic angle serves two purposes: it addresses relatable, often awkward, experiences around sexuality while ensuring the content remains light-hearted and consistent with TikTok's overall jovial atmosphere. Also, artistic representations of sexuality often take center stage on TikTok. From interpretative dances about the complexities of relationships to animations illustrating the beauty of the human form, creators have leveraged TikTok's tools to craft content that is both sensual and aesthetic.

In the genre of more erotic entertainment content, some sexual content creators are known for their aestheticized and sensuous performances and presentations, which are a direct nod to erotic entertainment. While often still attempting to adhere to TikTok's community guidelines on erotic content, this genre of sexual entertainment content employs seductive aesthetics, suggestive poses, and clever video editing techniques to evoke desire and captivate their audience, all under the guise of entertainment. For example, creators who used elements of burlesque or cabaret-style performances to entertain their audience. In this content, these performers created an entertaining context that balanced the line between

explicit eroticism and theatrical performance, crafting a viewing experience that was as much about the performance art as it is about the expression of sexual allure. Finally, as discussed in the previous examination of sex-edutainment, some creators use entertainment as a tool to present sexual education in a more palatable and engaging way. For instance, creators might use skits, parodies, or animations to discuss important sexual health topics, effectively turning education into a form of entertainment.

The study revealed some unique instances of sexual entertainment content on TikTok, with creators leveraging their specific experiences and expertise to provide distinctive and entertaining perspectives and contexts. One such example from the study was a film-set sexual intimacy coordinator who used TikTok to shed light on their profession and demystify the creation of sexual scenes in films. Through a series of videos, they provided insights into the careful choreography, respectful boundaries, and detailed communication between actors and intimacy coordinators that goes into producing such scenes. The coordinator's content often leveraged humour and satirical narratives to engage the audience, creating an enjoyable viewing experience while conveying important messages. They would humorously illustrate what can go wrong without proper communication during a simulated intimate scene. In doing so, they made the topic of professional on-set intimacy accessible and relatable to the public. By showing the behind-the-scenes work of sexual intimacy coordination, they not only entertained viewers with glimpses of the film industry but also underscored the importance of consent and communication, effectively blending entertainment with education. Moreover, by showcasing the intricacies of their work, they validated sexual intimacy coordination as a crucial profession within the film industry, challenging preconceived notions and helping to collapse societal taboos associated with the portrayal of sex in media. The content served a dual purpose of entertainment and education, demonstrating a unique approach to creating sexual edutainment content on TikTok.

Another documented example observed in the study was an erotic fiction writer. They shared excerpts from their novels, sometimes read dramatically to enhance the erotic tension, and at other times, discussed their writing process, providing insight into the creation of sensual literature. Their content explored themes of fantasy, desire, and romantic tension. They also created a virtual book club that

encouraged interaction and discussion among followers. The writer's use of the platform not only promoted their work but also contributed to a broader conversation about sexual fantasy and desire in literature, bridging the gap between entertainment and discourse on sexual expression. In terms of sexual context, this creators' content was layered with different contexts and intentions. At its surface, the content serves as an engaging and entertaining performance, as the writer recites sensuous excerpts with emotional inflection and dramatic flair, drawing viewers into the world of their stories. However, beneath this performative layer is an interactive educational context, where they illuminate the creative process behind their erotic narratives, fostering an appreciation for the genre and the craft of writing itself. Last, they also facilitate a space for open discussions on sexual fantasy and desire within literature, contributing to the broader discourse on sexual expression and representation. By intertwining these layers, the writer's content offers an immersive experience that extends beyond mere entertainment, demonstrating the unique dynamics of sexual entertainment content on TikTok. They can create a space that is not only entertaining but also enlightening, and in doing so, they push the boundaries of the platform's possibilities for sexual content.

Similarly, "swinger" couples on TikTok offered another fascinating example of unique sexual entertainment content. Swingers are individuals or couples who take part in consensual non-monogamous sexual activities, often exchanging partners with other individuals or couples for recreational sexual encounters. The swinger community on TikTok presents a vibrant and candid look into non-monogamous lifestyles, challenging traditional sexual norms. Swinger creators on TikTok offer diverse content contexts, from sharing personal anecdotes and advice to offering peeks into their lifestyle. Many posts address common misconceptions and stigmas associated with swinging, often through humour or compelling storytelling. Some content even takes a more educational approach, discussing the principles of consent, communication, and respect that underpin their relationships, while others portray day-to-day experiences, contributing to the normalisation of swinging as a lifestyle choice. The creators within this community use the platform to share their experiences, provide insights, and foster dialogue around the dynamics of swinging, thereby promoting a broader understanding and acceptance of such alternative

relationship models. By sharing their personal experiences and opening up about their lifestyle, they not only entertained viewers with their candidness but also sparked discussions about alternative relationship structures, contributing to a more inclusive dialogue on sexuality and relationship dynamics on the platform.

As these findings demonstrate, TikTok's sexual entertainment content offers viewers a unique blend of performances, purposes, and contexts that, while varying in their degree of eroticism, all contribute to a broader and richer discourse of sexual expression on the platform. As this spectrum of sexual entertainment content shows, the category of content is perhaps the most integrative within the typology of sexual content on TikTok. This is because of its intrinsic alignment with the platform's nature as a social media entertainment application. As a form of content, entertainment is inherently central to the functionality of social media platforms like TikTok. The platform's algorithm rewards content that captures and retains user attention, incentivizing creators to produce content that is not only informative or expressive but also entertaining. Consequently, entertainment becomes a crucial strategy for acquiring visibility on the platform, making it a common thread that weaves through all other categories of sexual content within this typology. Whether it is sexual education content presented with a humorous twist, personal sexual expression intertwined with artistic performances, or advocacy narratives embedded in captivating storytelling, the element of entertainment is a vital component. In essence, this category blends entertainment and sexuality, capturing the audience's attention and offering various forms of amusement and enjoyment around the themes of sex, sexuality, and sexual identity. While it does not necessarily aim to break down stereotypes or challenge societal norms, it often naturally encourages conversations around these topics simply by bringing them into the realm of entertainment and making them accessible for broader discussions.

In conclusion, at the heart of sexual entertainment content on TikTok lies the performative element and intention of entertainment. This performative aspect of sexual entertainment content is pivotal, imbuing this category with its characteristic appeal. Creators often manifest their narratives through engaging performances, leveraging their talent in areas such as comedy, dance, and music to

express sexual themes. These performances are rarely passive; they are designed with affect in mind–to evoke emotional responses, provoke thought, and incite dialogue, all while captivating the audience with their entertainment value. Creators may use a combination of humour, satire, or sensuality in their performances, fostering a unique blend of sexual content that simultaneously engages and entertains. Performances vary widely, each presenting its own unique style of engagement.

Tying these observations back to our central objective, it becomes evident that the entertainment genre's sexual content on TikTok is multifaceted. While the impulse to engage remains constant, the methods to achieve this engagement are manifold. Sexuality, in this context, isn't just a tool for titillation but serves as a versatile medium—be it for artistic expression, comedic relief, or sensual showcases. Its diverse representation within the entertainment genre highlights its crucial role in shaping TikTok's content culture, affirming its distinct place in the broader typology of sexual content on the platform. Ultimately, navigating the intricate dynamics of TikTok's entertainment-driven space, sexual entertainment content carves out a unique intersection of amusement and candid discussion on sexuality.

5.2.c. Advocacy-oriented Sexual Content: Sexual Advocacy

"Sexual advocacy content" on TikTok refers to the unique amalgamation of content that employs the platform's features to amplify voices and narratives that advocate for social and political issues related to sex, sexuality, and sexual health. Sexual advocacy content on TikTok encompasses a range of content styles and themes, all unified by the common intention to advocate for social or political causes that intersect with issues of sex, sexuality, and sexual health. This form of content can be seen as a digital form of activism, leveraging the platform's dynamic and visually rich format to create engaging and powerful narratives aimed at raising awareness, challenging stereotypes, and inspiring change. These content pieces may address an array of topics, such as sexual health education, LGBTQ+ rights, body positivity, sex work decriminalization, and more. Though diverse in context and politics, sexual advocacy content on TikTok seeks to shift perspectives, provoke critical thinking, and stimulate conversations that challenge societal norms around sex and sexuality. Its purpose extends beyond simple information sharing

or entertainment; instead, it aims to effect change by influencing attitudes, behaviours, and policy discussions.

While the core purpose of this content is advocacy, the contextual intentions range from sparking dialogue, driving social change, to fostering inclusivity and understanding. The case of Jeffrey Marsh, a popular TikTok creator, serves as a potent illustration of this point. Marsh, a nonbinary activist and author, consistently advocates for LGBTQ+ rights and acceptance on their TikTok platform. However, their approach goes beyond straightforward advocacy. They use the platform to cultivate a safe and accepting space for their followers, sharing their personal experiences, answering questions, and providing heartfelt affirmations that promote inclusivity and understanding. Marsh's content creates an ongoing dialogue around gender and sexuality. They encourage their followers to explore and express their own identities openly, leading to an environment that is as much about communal self-discovery as it is about political advocacy. This serves as a powerful example of how the purpose of sexual advocacy content on TikTok extends beyond advocacy into sparking dialogue, fostering inclusivity, and promoting understanding. As such, Marsh's content on TikTok demonstrates the app's capacity for nurturing dynamic conversations and communities around social causes.

Other similar empirical examples were observed in the study with less mainstream creators. Another notable case identified, for instance, pertained to a creator who was also a healthcare professional specializing in sexual health services for underserved communities. On TikTok, they used their platform to raise awareness about available resources while simultaneously advocating for health equity. Their content ranged from tips on accessing low-cost sexual health services, to debunking myths about sexually transmitted diseases, all aimed at breaking down barriers to vital information.

Despite the educational nature of their content, the overarching purpose remained clear: to advocate for equal access to sexual health resources, particularly among marginalized communities. They harnessed the power of TikTok's interactive format to draw attention to systemic issues in healthcare, sharing firsthand experiences and encouraging their followers to share their own stories. This form of user interaction not only amplified their advocacy efforts but also created a supportive, engaged community

that could rally around these issues. By integrating advocacy into their educational content, they brought the often-ignored issues to the forefront, effectively challenging the status quo while offering practical solutions. Their content served a dual purpose, informing viewers about crucial health resources while simultaneously advocating for change in how these resources are distributed. Thus, their content was more than just a tool for information dissemination; it was a platform for advocacy, education, and community-building, highlighting how the social and technical features of TikTok can be leveraged to advocate for social causes in unique and impactful ways.

Another creator producing content in this category leveraged their platform to share personal experiences as a black transgender individual, with the self-described aim of debunking myths, exposing discrimination, and advocating for transgender rights. Offering insights into everyday life and parenting, they humanized and personalized discussions around trans rights, challenging stereotypes and educating their audience about the intersection of being black, transgender, and a parent. This creator's content extended beyond personal anecdotes, advocating for increased acceptance, and understanding of transgender individuals, particularly those of color. By allowing viewers a window into their life, the creator underlined that they are not just a concept or a news headline, but a real person with joys, struggles, and routines. The creator's content underscores the potency of personal storytelling for advocacy, using TikTok's unique features to engage and educate their audience and thereby promote change through increased visibility and understanding.

As these cases illustrate, sexual advocacy content on TikTok uniquely combines the social reach and interactive and highly engaging nature of the platform with a pressing social or political cause, forging a powerful tool for raising awareness, fostering empathy, and sometimes even motivating action. This type of content often serves as a virtual front line for activism on TikTok, showcasing real-world experiences and issues that impact individuals' sexual health, rights, and freedoms. It introduces viewers to perspectives that might otherwise remain unnoticed, effectively using the platform's features to capture, in real-time, the realities of those affected by the advocacy issues addressed. A prime example observed in the study was content created by abortion clinic escorts. These individuals, who accompany women

seeking abortions through crowds of protesters, use TikTok to document their experiences and expose the challenges faced by women seeking this medical service. In these videos, the creators not only advocate for women's rights and abortion access but also humanize the often-daunting process of seeking an abortion. They highlight the courage of these women and the dedication of the clinic workers, in turn shedding light on the necessity of the organizations providing these services. Sometimes, creators use the platform to rally support for these organizations, urging viewers to donate and get involved.

Another intriguing example of sexual advocacy content observed many times during the study was content created with the intention of advocating for fairer content moderation policies on TikTok, particularly in relation to sexual content. Numerous creators observably used TikTok itself as a platform to shed light on perceived biases and inconsistencies in its sexual content moderation policies and practices. Creators from various spectrums of content production - from sexual educators to LGBTQ+ creators to sex workers - voiced their concerns about the platform's moderation. Some argued that the current policies disproportionately target and silence certain voices, particularly those of marginalized communities, and fail to make a distinction between explicit, harmful content and content that merely discusses or portrays sexual themes in a positive or educational manner. One creator, for example, produced a video in which they cited instances of their educational content being flagged or taken down, despite not violating any community guidelines: "It feels like we're being punished for merely existing and trying to educate," they said in one video, highlighting the frustrations faced by many creators attempting to navigate the platform's seemingly arbitrary moderation practices. In another instance, another creator known for their sexual health advocacy and LGBTQ+ content posted a video captioned, "Woke up to find half my videos taken down again. This is what we mean when we say the moderation policy isn't fair."

In other instances, creators rallied against 'brigading,' a phenomenon where a group of users collectively flags and reports content, often with the intention of silencing or harassing certain creators, particularly those who are non-conforming or who engage with sexual themes. One creator succinctly addressed this issue, stating, "Brigading is not about upholding community standards, it's a weaponized

tool of bias and censorship." Another creator, who self-identifies in their content as non-binary and frequently discusses their experiences on the platform, similarly shared a series of videos documenting their involvements with content removal and account suspension. "Every time I make a video about my life, about being non-binary, I get flagged. I get comments telling me they're going to report me. We exist, and we should be allowed to exist here too," they stated. These videos efficiently spotlight the intricacies of content moderation and raise awareness about the significant impact it has on creators, especially those addressing sexual topics. In the aforementioned video, the creator even proposes solutions, emphasizing that while the aim of content moderation should be to foster a safe and inclusive platform, current practices might inadvertently suppress meaningful conversations and marginalize certain voices. Thus, through their content, creators like this advocate for a more equitable approach to content moderation, further broadening the scope of sexual advocacy content on TikTok.

Ultimately, the advocacy function of sexual advocacy content is the primary contextual purpose, underscoring the pressing need for reform and action on these issues. However, secondary contextual purposes are often intertwined within the primary advocacy message. These can include educating viewers about the realities and intricacies of the abortion process, engaging viewers in a discussion about women's rights, and even highlighting the views of the protestors, thus fostering a broader understanding of the situation. In contrast to educational or entertainment content, sexual advocacy content on TikTok stands out for its purpose-driven nature. It is not just about disseminating information or engaging viewers in a light-hearted manner; instead, it has an inherent call to action that leverages the immediacy and connectedness of the platform to spark real-world change. In essence, sexual advocacy content on TikTok uniquely bridges the digital realm with tangible societal issues, becoming a dynamic force in the contemporary landscape of digital activism.

As discussed briefly, sexual advocacy content encompasses more than just the expression of advocative contexts; it also includes the critical role of performance and representation. In this light, creators, embodying the ethos of 'the personal is political,' often use their personal identities to construct narratives not traditionally witnessed in mainstream media. By portraying themselves in non-

conventionally associated contexts, creators deliberately challenge normative discourses and advocate for broader representation and understanding. This strategic employment of their performative identities counters mainstream narratives, adding new dimensions to the discussion on sex and sexuality. For example, one Muslim creator was observed leveraging her platform to discuss sex and arousal from an Islamic perspective, a subject often considered taboo in conventional discourses. Through this content, she not only advocated for a more open conversation about sex within her community but also challenged stereotypes and broadened the understanding of Muslim women's experiences. Her content serves dual purposes — to educate, in line with traditional sex education content, and to advocate, challenging societal norms and advocating for a more inclusive discourse on Muslim sexuality.

Another example observed during the study were plus-size pole dancers, who showcase their skills in TikTok videos. Plus-size pole dancers, in their embodiment of a strong counter-narrative on TikTok, defy and disrupt traditional norms within the pole dancing sphere, typically characterized by lean body types. By sharing videos of themselves engaging in pole dancing routines with confidence and flair, these creators actively advocate for a more inclusive vision of the pole dancing community that celebrates a diversity of body types. This content simultaneously serves several purposes across a spectrum of contexts. Foremost, it functions as a platform for advocacy, challenging the limited representation of body types within pole dancing and the wider fitness community. It pushes back against entrenched narratives that equate athleticism and grace with slenderness, advocating instead for an acceptance and celebration of all body types in the expression of physicality and artistry. Moreover, this content provides an affirming and empowering representation for viewers who share similar body types with the creators. It presents a form of visibility often absent from mainstream media, fostering a sense of validation and community among viewers. This sense of representation can have significant personal and social impacts, encouraging self-acceptance and body positivity, and inspiring others to try activities they may have previously felt excluded from.

Importantly, at the same time, this plus-size pole dancing content is not only advocating content but also serves to educate the wider audience, implicitly challenging ingrained societal biases about body

types and physical capabilities. By showcasing their skills and confidence, these creators contradict stereotypes that undermine plus-sized individuals' athletic potential, reinforcing the notion that skill, strength, and grace are not exclusive to any particular body type. Furthermore, the content works within the entertainment domain as well, with the creators' performances providing a visually captivating display of strength, flexibility, and dance, regardless of the creators' advocacy goals. Thus, while the core intention might be advocacy, the enjoyment derived from viewing the performances expands the content's reach and impact, garnering attention from a wider audience that may not have initially sought such content. In these various ways, plus-size pole dancers on TikTok leverage their performed identities in a traditionally non-inclusive context to serve a complex array of purposes—from advocacy and representation to education and entertainment. Taken together, these examples show that the advocacy found in this type of content is multi-layered, with creators using their personal identities and experiences to challenge traditional narratives and advocate for change. Their performances, set in contexts where their voices are often silenced, contribute to a broader discourse on sexual diversity and inclusivity.

It is important to note as well that sexual advocacy content is produced by organizations, in addition to individual activists. Organizational accounts operating in this domain include health organizations like Planned Parenthood, the Trevor Project, and the American Sexual Health Association. Each of these organizations, while having distinct missions and audiences, utilize TikTok to highlight their work, educate audiences about sexual health and rights, raise funds, and mobilize their audience to take action. For instance, Planned Parenthood has leveraged TikTok to create content that normalizes and destigmatizes conversations around reproductive health and rights, using engaging storytelling and relatable humour to resonate with a younger audience. The Trevor Project, on the other hand, uses TikTok to promote 2SLGBTQ+ mental health and suicide prevention, creating safe and inclusive online spaces for young 2SLGBTQ+ individuals. These are three of numerous examples, as the study revealed TikTok has become a major means of organizational advocacy.

Another major aspect of advocacy content is the prevalent context of advocacy campaigns. Unlike more decentralized and traditional advocacy campaigns social media platforms, TikTok offers a

unique, dynamic, and interactive space that capitalizes on the performative, visual, and participatory potentials of social media. It has emerged as a powerful tool for producing advocacy content that is not only educational but also entertaining and engaging. As observed in the study, advocacy campaigns on TikTok often blend elements of advocacy, entertainment, and education within the platform's unique content formats. This approach not only spreads awareness and information but also creates a unique user experience that encourages audience participation and interaction.

For instance, organizations creatively employ the duet and stitch features to amplify their messages, directly engaging with followers and fostering dialogue around their causes. These features are often used to respond to queries, dispel misconceptions, or challenge biases, thus promoting a more inclusive and informed discourse. More significantly, these interactions help to humanize the organization, fostering a sense of community and shared purpose among users. Furthermore, the platform-specific features of TikTok enable organizations to amplify the voices of those they advocate for by featuring their stories or responses within the organization's own content. This approach not only lends credibility and urgency to their advocacy efforts but also provides a platform for marginalized voices, reinforcing the community-centric nature of TikTok's advocacy networks. Beyond individual interactions, the use of hashtags and interactive challenges allows these organizations to create wider networks of advocacy. Users who contribute to the content network, as well as engage with these challenges or use these hashtags, become part of a broader community committed to a shared cause, effectively building a virtual support network.

Ultimately, these new methods of organizational advocacy on TikTok, reflecting its unique socio-technical contexts, present a compelling blend of advocacy, entertainment, and educational content. They engage users in ways that are both informative and enjoyable, building communities around these causes, and driving social change in ways previously unattainable through traditional advocacy channels. The unique affordances of TikTok, such as the ease of content creation, sharing, and interaction, combined with its wide reach among younger demographics, provide a potent tool for these organizations to connect with audiences, foster dialogue, and catalyze action in ways that were not possible with traditional forms

of advocacy. Thus, these organizations are not only taking part in the existing discourse on sexual advocacy on TikTok but also reshaping it, influencing both the medium and the message. By forming partnerships and collaborations, they create a powerful network that advocates for positive change in the realm of sex and sexuality. Through their engaging and informative content, they raise awareness, challenge societal norms, and empower their audience to become agents of change. By leveraging the power of sexual content through performances and contexts that contribute to advocacy, these creators attempt to pave the way for positive transformations and help shape conversations around important sexual issues on TikTok and beyond.

5.2.d. Gender, Sexuality, and Identity: Sexual Expression Content

Sexual expression content on TikTok encompassed an array of content where creators genuinely and unapologetically explored, embraced, and communicated their sexuality, sexual identity, sexual desires, and gender through their performances captured by their content. Creators on TikTok engaging in personal sexual expression use the platform as a powerful means to explore and express their own sexuality and gender, which in some cases can challenge societal norms, and foster acceptance of diverse sexual identities and expressions through online performance and content production. Sexual expression content on TikTok can take various forms and contexts, including but not limited to discussions about sexual experiences, reflections on personal journeys of self-discovery and identity exploration, artistic expressions of desire and pleasure, and conversations around relationships. It can also involve the sharing of personal stories and experiences related to gender identity, body positivity, and the celebration of diverse sexual orientations. These creators utilize the platform as an empowering space to explore and express their own unique perspectives on sexuality.

The study found this type of content had affirming qualities, as it provided a space for individuals to authentically express their true selves and receive validation and support from their audiences. For example, many transgender individuals utilized TikTok as a platform to perform and express their gender identity. Through the use of filters, makeup, clothing, symbols, and more, these creators visually

transformed themselves and presented in their desired gender through a gendered-context or performance. This digital performance not only allowed them to experience a sense of affirmation and validation, but it also created opportunities for them to connect with and find community among other transgender individuals. Additionally, transgender creators often shared the chronicles of their gender transition, offering unfiltered insights into their experiences with physical changes, emotional challenges, medical procedures, and societal responses. This content served beyond self-expression; it provided support and validation for others on similar journeys while also educating cisgender users about the realities of gender transition. The act of expressing one's sexuality and gender on TikTok through sexual expression content creation, therefore, can be seen to some as a form of gender-affirming care, providing individuals with a space to authentically explore and share their experiences, while also fostering understanding and empathy within the broader TikTok community.

Another example observed in the study was the use of TikTok by 2SLGBTQ+ individuals as a platform to come out and share their sexual orientation or gender identity. The spectrum of context in "coming out" content on TikTok was diverse and ranged from heartfelt personal narratives to creative and humorous approaches. Some individuals choose to create emotional videos where they openly discuss their journey of self-discovery and the challenges they faced in accepting their sexual orientation or gender identity. These videos often aimed to provide support and solidarity to others who may go through similar experiences, fostering a sense of belonging and community. In addition to personal narratives, there are also instances of 2SLGBTQ+ creators using TikTok's creative features to express their sexual identity in more lighthearted and entertaining ways. They may employ humour, skits, or clever visual storytelling techniques to come out to their audience, adding an element of joy and celebration to their self-disclosure. This type of content not only served as a personal milestone but also helped to normalize and destigmatize diverse sexual orientations within the broader TikTok community.

The purpose and intent of coming out content on TikTok varied among individuals. For some, the primary aim was self-expression and finding acceptance for their true selves. By sharing their stories openly, they hoped to collapse societal barriers, challenge stereotypes, and promote understanding and

empathy towards 2SLGBTQ+ individuals. Others had a broader goal of creating visibility and representation, especially for those who may not have access to 2SLGBTQ+ communities or resources in their offline lives. By coming out through TikTok content, they become visible role models, providing hope and inspiration to others who may still struggle with their sexual orientation or gender identity. Overall, TikTok provides a unique and powerful platform for individuals to come out and express their sexual orientation or gender identity. The act of coming out through TikTok content serves personal, interpersonal, and societal purposes. It allows individuals to assert their true selves, connect with others, and contribute to a more inclusive and accepting digital landscape.

Besides the self-affirming and recognition encompassed in performing gender identity and coming out on TikTok, sexual expression content also serves as a means for individuals to engage in activities that may not be accessible in their physical material contexts. An illustrative example of this observed in the study is the experience of young drag queen performers from rural locations, where access to drag bars or 2SLGBTQ+ communities may be limited. These individuals, often referred to as "bedroom queens," found a virtual stage on TikTok to showcase their drag performances. Despite never stepping foot in a physical drag bar or having their physical social networks aware of their activities, some could amass millions of followers. Through their TikTok content, these bedroom queens transformed their bedrooms into stages where they could express their drag personas and entertain virtual audiences. By sharing their performances online, they not only showcased their talent and creativity but also connected with and performed for 2SLGBTQ+ communities in a virtual space. The virtual platform of TikTok allowed them to overcome geographical limitations and engage with a broader audience, fostering a sense of belonging, acceptance, and appreciation for their artistry.

For these individuals, TikTok served as a vital platform for self-expression and community-building, creating opportunities for connection, recognition, and support that may have been lacking in their physical surroundings. By sharing their drag performances digitally, they could find validation and acceptance from virtual communities that appreciated their talent and celebrated their unique art form. In this way, sexual expression content on TikTok transcends physical boundaries of expression and provides

a space where individuals can explore and express their sexual identities and creative passions, even in the absence of physical spaces or opportunities for such expression. Through a diverse range of content formats and performed contexts, these creators genuinely, and often unapologetically, shared personal stories, reflections, and artistic expressions that conveyed their unique identities, locations, and perspectives in terms of sexuality. This unapologetic approach seen in a lot of sexual expression content is noteworthy because it highlights the intentional reclaiming of visibility and the deliberate embrace of context collapse as an empowering stage for sexual expression.

As previously discussed, the unique characteristics of the TikTok's FYP, with its innate publicness of content circulation, magnifies context collapse - merging different audiences into one. This feature, which would traditionally be seen as disorienting in the social media sphere (Marwick & Boyd, 2011), is instead reclaimed and repurposed by creators producing sexual expression content. In much of this content, creators appear to display a performative disinterest or indifference to the vast, collapsed audience their content reaches. They openly express their sexuality, desires, and experiences without tailoring the message or performance to a specific audience or mitigating its potential impact because of the wide audience reach. This act of reclaiming the stage amidst a context collapse functions as a bold expression of self-affirmation and defiance against traditional norms that might constrain such open discussions of sexuality. The creators' evident lack of concern for who sees their content signals a shift in power dynamics. They seize control of the digital space, implicitly challenging the traditional discomfort associated with the blurring of social and audience boundaries. Instead of being disoriented by the collapsed context, these creators embrace it, using the platform to reach a diverse audience and drive broader understanding and acceptance of diverse sexual experiences and identities.

At the heart of sexual expression content on TikTok is a politics of visibility, where creators purposefully embrace the collapse of context to reclaim visibility in a desired way. By openly sharing their personal stories, reflections, and artistic expressions, these creators challenge societal norms and redefine the boundaries of visibility. They use the platform's wide reach and public nature to perform and express their sexuality without conforming to specific audiences or mitigating their impact. This

intentional reclaiming of visibility within the context collapse allows creators to assert their identities and foster greater acceptance and understanding of diverse sexual experiences. Through this act of reclaiming visibility, sexual expression content on TikTok becomes a powerful vehicle for self-expression, liberation, and cultural transformation.

The visibility politics within sexual expression content encompassed both social and technical dimensions. Socially, the use of context in the content became a form of self-expression, self-affirmation, and recognition, which at times can challenge societal taboos and norms around sexuality depending on the context. This was observed in various contexts, such as creators openly discussing their personal sexual experiences, sharing stories of self-discovery and revelations, exploring topics related to relationships, consent, and communication. Through these discussions, creators navigated the complex landscape of sexual expression, contributing to a broader dialogue and de-stigmatization of these topics. For example, creators shared their personal journeys of self-discovery, highlighting moments of self-realization and growth, which resonated with viewers and fostered a sense of community and understanding.

On the technical front, TikTok's platform and features play a crucial role in framing and facilitating the expression of sexual content. The short-form video format allowed creators to distill their thoughts and experiences into concise and impactful content, capturing the attention of viewers within a limited timeframe. Using visual elements, such as filters, effects, and editing techniques, enhances the expressive quality of the content, enabling creators to convey their unique perspectives on sexuality in a visually engaging manner. Additionally, the platform's algorithmic-driven FYP amplifies the visibility of sexual expression content, exposing it to a wider audience and facilitating the dissemination of diverse perspectives on sexuality.

A prime case example of these layers of expression observed in the study was a creator who used the platform's "Am I gay? Filter" to come out to his audience as gay. By leveraging this specific filter, the creator effectively combined the visual element with their personal narrative, creating a visually captivating and emotionally resonant expression of their sexual identity. In the video, the creator runs the

filter, showcasing the percentages that represent their orientation. While the filter itself has been widely used by numerous creators, in this specific context, the outcome of the test serves as a powerful context for the creator to disclose their sexual orientation. In other words, the use of the filter not only engages viewers through its interactive nature but also creates a specific context for the creator to openly express their identity. Through this combination of the filter's technical features and the creator's intentional use of context, the video becomes a powerful tool for self-expression, fostering connection, and inviting dialogue about sexual identity. Furthermore, the reach and visibility afforded by TikTok's FYP further amplifies the impact of this content, as it has the potential to reach a wide audience and, through 'duets' and 'stitches' contribute to broader discussions surrounding 2SLGBTQ+ experiences. Thus, this content piece, and others alike, serve as a powerful social-technical platform for individuals to assert agency over their own sexual narratives, create contexts to do so, and–whether purposely or inadvertently–challenge societal norms and fostering a vibrant, inclusive, and affirming space for discussions about diverse sexualities and gender identities.

Ultimately, personal sexual expression content on TikTok is a distinct form of sexual content that stands out because of its unapologetic emphasis on personal narratives, authenticity, and intimate self-expression. This unique blend of performance, production process, sounds, and meta-data shapes an intimate and genuine space for sexual expression on the platform, allowing creators to share their personal experiences, fantasies, desires, and perspectives in a deeply personal and authentic manner. The content produced for personal sexual expression by creators on TikTok played a significant role in fostering conversations, promoting acceptance, and challenging societal norms surrounding sex and sexuality. Through their authentic self-expression and user-generated contexts, the creators of this content produced a platform (content) within a platform (TikTok) for individuals to explore their own sexualities, establish connections, and contribute to a more inclusive understanding of personal sexual expression. These creators played an essential part in expanding the discourse on sexuality and empowering individuals to embrace and celebrate their own unique sexual journeys.

5.2.e. Seductive and Provocative Sexual Content: Seduction (“Spicy Content”)

The data also identified the presence of seductive and provocative sexual content on TikTok, a category characterized by creators employing various techniques to elicit desire, curiosity, and intrigue among their audience. These creators strategically use seductive aesthetics, suggestive gestures, teasing elements, and alluring visuals to create a captivating and enticing experience for viewers. One example observed in the study is the presence of creators who produce content centred around lingerie hauls, showcasing different lingerie sets in a seductive and provocative manner. Another example includes creators who specialize in ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) videos with sexual undertones, using whispered voices and intimate sounds to evoke a sensual and intimate experience for the audience. These creators leverage the platform's short-form video format and visual-rich content to create an immersive and stimulating experience that blurs the line between erotica and entertainment.

Seductive and provocative sexual content on TikTok arguably represents an intriguing intersection between explicit pornography and non-erotic content, suggestive of an emergent, unique genre of sexual content and contexts in digital media. This form of content, resonating some characteristics of soft-core pornography, employs strategic use of aesthetics, suggestive non-verbal cues, and elements of tease to construct an enticing narrative while remaining within the social and technical bounds of explicitness. It's noteworthy that such content occupies a more sexualized space than typically observed in content on mainstream social media platforms, yet it skillfully avoids the explicitness typically associated with conventional pornography. This genre manifests within the intersection between pornographic and non-pornographic content, invoking sexual desire while abiding by the public nature and content moderation policies of platforms like TikTok.

Seductive and provocative content on TikTok therefore refers to visually captivating and alluring videos that aim to elicit sexual desire or attraction from the audience. This category of content, commonly known by TikTokers as "spicy content" or "thirst traps," incorporates sexually suggestive elements and contexts, such as provocative clothing, suggestive poses, and flirtatious performances, to engage and entice viewers. It is important to note that the seductiveness and provocativeness of this content are

defined within the context of TikTok's unique content moderation policies and practices. What may be considered provocative on TikTok may not be deemed as such on other platforms, such as dedicated pornography platforms, where explicit content is more prevalent. The perception of seductiveness is subjective and varies depending on individual perspectives and cultural norms.

On TikTok, the prohibition of explicit sexual content has resulted in a shifting landscape of what is considered sexual content on the platform. Rather than eliminating sexual content altogether, this prohibition has simply moved the needle and given rise to a distinct form of erotic content that operates within the boundaries set by TikTok's guidelines. In this context, creators engage in a delicate balancing act between seductive suggestion and explicitness, employing their creativity to captivate attention and generate intrigue while adhering to the platform's content policies. The proliferation of sexual content on TikTok can be attributed, in part, to the inherent attention-grabbing nature of sexual themes. Creators recognize the allure of sex as a powerful tool to draw attention and attract followers. However, because of the platform's restrictions on explicit content, creators must find innovative ways to convey seductiveness without crossing the line into explicitness. Within the realm of seductive and provocative content on TikTok, creators strategically navigate this fine line by utilizing various creative techniques that will be explored further in the next chapter.

A good way to capture this idea is with the notion of 'porn chic' sexiness, as articulated by Drenten, Guerreiri, and Tyler (2020). At its core, 'porn chic' encapsulates ‘the transposition of commercial pornography's visual and aesthetic tropes into the broader fabric of Western popular culture, giving rise to a phenomenon characterized by the fragmentation and blurring of pornographic imagery as it converges with traditionally non-pornographic media forms’ (Drenten et al., 2020, 41). On TikTok, this is exemplified by the emergence of trends and motifs that deploy alluring and provocative elements, which resonate with the hallmarks of 'porn chic.' Some TikTok videos borrow from the aesthetics of 'porn chic', for example, by simulating intimate scenarios, often through creative use of camera angles and suggestive body language. For example, a creator might film a point-of-view (POV) video that places the viewer in the perspective of a romantic or sexual partner. The video may include close-up shots of the creator's face,

flirtatious dialogue, and teasing gestures that evoke the intimate ambiance of a romantic encounter. Though lacking explicit sexual content, these videos mimic the decontextualized and voyeuristic elements of pornography, while being presented in a stylized and mainstream format.

Another example of 'porn chic' on TikTok involves creators using visual illusions to suggest the act of undressing without actually revealing nudity. In these videos, creators might start fully clothed and then playfully pretend to remove clothing items, often using camera cuts or strategic props to maintain modesty. The video cuts away or ends just before any nudity would be revealed, leaving the outcome to the viewer's imagination. This trend effectively teases the viewer with the promise of nudity, similar to the titillation techniques used in commercial pornography, but remains within the boundaries of the platform's community guidelines by avoiding explicit content. The videos encapsulate 'porn chic' by integrating the aesthetics of sexual tease and flirtation into a mainstream social media context.

A notable iteration of 'porn chic' on TikTok in this regard is exemplified through the “Get Ready with Me” or #GRWM trend, in which creators’ film themselves in the process of getting dressed and ready for the day (Hamilton, 2022). The seemingly mundane task of getting ready to start one’s day is often sexualized on TikTok through carefully curated shots that accentuate the creator's body while performing the actions of getting dressed for the day. For instance, creators may begin the video in their underwear or scantily clad attire, and then proceed to put on clothing while capturing attention-grabbing moments, such as the struggle to lift tight pants over their buttocks or the display of their physique through form-fitting underwear that leaves little to the imagination. The framing of these shots may emphasize close-up views of the creator's body, and the camera angles are often chosen to accentuate curves and sensual movements. Though the content of the video may depict everyday activities, the presentation style borrows from 'porn chic' aesthetics, transforming the ordinary into the provocative. Importantly, these videos maintain plausible deniability, as the creators are ostensibly just getting ready; however, the visual language employed resonates with the hallmarks of commercial pornography. In this way, the #GRWM trend exemplifies how 'porn chic' permeates the digital mainstream, sexualizing the mundane while skirting the lines of content moderation with plausible deniability.

The stylized and performative portrayals of sensuality on TikTok, whether manifested through alluring dance challenges or inventive expressions of sexual allure, “reflect the visual lexicon of commercial pornography” (Drenten et al., 2020), while simultaneously navigating the boundaries of platform acceptability. These portrayals, which both tantalize and tease viewers, exemplify the negotiation of sexual expression within the constraints of community guidelines. The incorporation of 'porn chic' aesthetics within TikTok content signifies more than just the permeation of pornographic imagery into the digital mainstream, however (Drenten et al., 2020). It is emblematic of the cultural fluidity and evolving norms that shape online sexual self-expression in a rapidly changing digital landscape. In this context, the dynamics of sexual expression and identity on TikTok are inextricably entwined with broader societal discourses on desire, empowerment, and representation. Importantly, these dynamics intersect with the complexities of content moderation, as platforms grapple with the challenge of discerning between permissible expressions of sexuality and content deemed inappropriate or harmful.

The distinctiveness of seductive and provocative sexual content on TikTok is rooted in its ability to navigate and push the boundaries of acceptability within the platform's unique guidelines, as well as societal and technical norms. This form of content challenges the limits of what is considered appropriate or permissible, presenting a unique avenue for sexual expression that captivates viewers and garners their engagement and attention. The creators of seductive and provocative content skillfully employ a technique known as boundary work, strategically maneuvering within the confines of the platform's content policies to elicit sexual themes and desires without crossing the line that could lead to deplatforming or removal of their content.

Much like the other sexual content categories, a notable aspect of seductive and provocative content is its strategic reliance on context collapse. Creators intentionally collapse TikTok’s prescribed contextual boundaries to re-appropriate it as one where sexual themes can be conveyed and desired responses can be elicited. By skillfully using a combination of visual cues, interface affordances, suggestive performances, and alluring narratives, creators strategically collapse the boundaries between their content and the viewers, fostering an intimate and engaging experience that blurs the distinction

between public and private spheres. This method of performance, rooted in the deliberate collapse of context, is a technical skill employed by creators to effectively convey their desired message and evoke the desired response from their audience. It highlights the creators' ability to navigate the platform's guidelines, audience expectations, and societal norms to create content that is both enticing and within the bounds of acceptability. By strategically collapsing context, creators can engage viewers in a compelling and intimate manner, while still operating within the constraints imposed by the platform.

In addition to strategic context collapse, another notable element of seductive and provocative sexual content lives in its incorporation of voyeuristic tendencies, amateurism, and an aura of accidentalism. The term 'voyeurism' in this context refers to the consumption of content that provides the viewer a glimpse into ostensibly private, subtly sexual moments of others. The perceived amateur or accidental nature of the content enhances its authenticity, thus amplifying its voyeuristic allure of this subtle sexual content genre on platforms like TikTok. Much of the appeal in this content lies in the raw, unpolished, and seemingly spontaneous nature of the content, which is often constructed under the guise of mishaps, slip-ups, and wardrobe malfunctions. These elements, whether or not intentional, add an unexpected layer of intrigue and sexual innuendo that contributes to the content's overall allure.

For instance, creators of all kinds employ strategic clothing choices and draping techniques that hint at more explicit visuals but stop short of crossing the line into overtly sexual content. A seemingly unplanned camera drop may provide an impromptu and suggestive view up a creator's shorts, or specific clothing worn in certain positions might reveal more than what meets the casual observer's eye. These aspects, although ostensibly accidental, are often integral parts of the content's design, aimed at enhancing the sense of spontaneity and raw authenticity. In these narratives, the creator often pretends to be oblivious to the suggestive elements, thus enhancing the viewer's sense of accidental discovery and voyeuristic pleasure. By pretending not to notice these 'accidents,' the creators craft an implicit narrative where viewers feel privy to private, sensual moments that were ostensibly not meant for their eyes. This further plays into the voyeuristic tendencies of the viewers and adds an element of surprise, increasing the content's appeal. This strategy incorporates elements of voyeurism, exhibitionism, and suspense to

stimulate viewers' curiosity and emotional investment, thereby promoting higher engagement and visibility for the creator's content.

Examples of such content and strategy can be seen across various genres on TikTok, demonstrating the diverse ways in which creators strategically employ seductive and provocative elements as a strategic performance method to further engage their audiences. Sex workers and adult performers, for instance, utilize "thirst-traps" as promotional teasers for their services or subscription-based content. These snippets, usually carefully crafted within the boundaries of platform guidelines, are designed to elicit desire and curiosity, enticing potential consumers to explore their premium offerings. However, the use of "thirst-trap" content and strategy extends beyond the realm of pornography. In fact, creators from various domains, such as lifestyle influencers, fitness trainers, and fashion bloggers, also incorporate "thirst-trap" elements to enhance the appeal and growth of their content. While their primary focus may not be explicit sexuality, the strategic inclusion of suggestive themes and visuals can attract a broader viewership, expanding their online persona and intensifying parasocial relationships with their audience. These creators leverage the allure of seductive and provocative content to captivate and retain the attention of their viewers, fuelling engagement and fostering a sense of connection (Duguay, 2017). This shows how the incorporation of sexual elements within the boundaries of acceptability can be a powerful strategy for creators across different content genres to increase their visibility and broaden their reach.

One notable example documented was a creator who regularly posts provocative and seductive videos to promote their soap business. The self-described "soap daddy" utilizes this content strategy as a marketing tool to generate attention and interest in their products. In these videos, the creator intertwines sexual themes with the operations of their business, creating a unique blend of entertainment and promotion. For instance, they might dress up in a revealing toga as cupid while packing deliveries, incorporating a playful and flirtatious element into the mundane task. Additionally, during live streams, they engage with customers while streaming from bed in nothing but their underwear, creating a sense of intimacy and allure. Through these tactics, the creator effectively elicits "thirst" from their audience,

leveraging seductive and provocative contexts to engage viewers and generate excitement about their soap products. This example highlights how the strategic use of sexual expression content can serve as a powerful tool for marketing and brand promotion, capturing attention and fostering consumer interest through a unique blend of sexuality and business operations.

Another notable example of this phenomenon was observed in the study with the creator John Pearce, a member of the popular Australian children's musical group, the Wiggles. On TikTok, John takes on a much different persona from his child-friendly performances with the Wiggles. He shares topless workout videos showcasing his physique, engages in risqué and suggestive dance moves, and even jokes about code-switching from 'Everyday John' to 'John Wiggle'. By strategically incorporating seductive and provocative elements into his TikTok content, John attracts a new audience who may be drawn to the contrast between his playful and flirtatious persona on the platform and his more wholesome image in the children's entertainment industry. This example exemplifies how creators can strategically navigate the boundaries of acceptability to captivate viewers and enhance their online presence through the use of seductive and provocative content. By intentionally blurring the lines between his child-friendly persona and his seductive TikTok content, John cultivates intrigue and curiosity among his audience, allowing him to expand his reach and appeal beyond his established fanbase. This strategic deployment of seductive and provocative content demonstrates the power of context and performed identity in shaping audience perception and engagement on TikTok.

A significant aspect that contributes to the allure of this strategic performance and context is the presence of raw amateurism, voyeurism, and a sense of accidental discovery that defines this content. Creators purposefully embrace a certain level of imperfection, unpolished presentation, and unscripted moments to create an atmosphere of authenticity and relatability. This deliberate cultivation of an amateur aesthetic adds to the appeal of the content, as viewers feel a sense of voyeuristic immersion into the creator's unfiltered and unvarnished world. The accidentalism, whether genuine or carefully crafted, builds on the amateur performance and aesthetic to create an illusion of stumbling upon intimate and private moments, adding a layer of intrigue and excitement for the audience. This combination of inter-

playing amateurism, voyeurism, and accidentalism amplifies the seductive and provocative nature of the content, drawing viewers into a captivating and immersive experience.

At the centre of this strategy of inter-playing amateurism, voyeurism, and accidentalism is a strategic performance of a lack of strategy. A “strategic performance of lack of strategy” could be referred to as a deliberate act of spontaneity or calculated nonchalance. It involves consciously presenting oneself as if there is no preconceived plan or specific intention behind one's actions or decisions, while secretly employing a strategic approach behind the scenes. This kind of performance aims to create an impression of authenticity, unpredictability, or carefree behaviour, while still strategically influencing the outcomes or perceptions in a desired direction. In sexually seductive and provocative content on social media, a strategic performance of lack of strategy can be employed for multiple reasons. First, to enhance the allure and mystique of the content. Creators may purposefully present themselves as spontaneously and organically (or by mistake) engaging in provocative behaviour, giving the impression that their actions are not premeditated or calculated. This deliberate act of appearing unscripted adds an element of authenticity and immediacy, creating a sense of intimacy and connection with the audience.

Furthermore, this strategic performance of a lack of strategy in sexually seductive and provocative content serves as a form of boundary work, allowing creators to navigate the limits of platform guidelines while maintaining plausible deniability. By presenting their content as spontaneous and unscripted, creators can argue that any perceived breach of guidelines was unintentional or a result of misinterpretation. This adds a layer of protection and minimizes the risk of being flagged or deplatformed, as the creator can fall back on the narrative of the content being accidental and uncontrolled.

Paradoxically, in the interplay of platform regulations, content creation, and viewers’ consumption, these 'accidental' elements have emerged as a significant driving force behind the popularity and appeal of this unique content genre. This genre thrives within the platform’s public sphere, where users, amidst their regular content consumption, encounter these subtly sexual clips, accentuating the aspect of accidental discovery and the thrill of voyeurism. The platform's rigorous content moderation

policies paradoxically amplify the allure, fostering an environment where creators navigate the delicate balance of boundary-pushing and acceptability. This interplay between content creators and platform regulation therefore presents a dynamic tension, wherein prohibition leads to sexually suggestive content, which results in becoming even more tantalizingly appealing, in part due to the very constraints intended to regulate it. The creative dexterity of these content creators in probing the boundaries of acceptability, while remaining compliant, amplifies the allure of this genre, contributing to its burgeoning popularity on platforms like TikTok.

The allure and effectiveness of seductive and provocative sexual content, thus, lie in the grey area they inhabit. This type of content teeters on the edge of explicitness, deliberately skirting the boundaries of acceptability. It is this tension and anticipation that keeps viewers on the edge, constantly seeking the possibility of an accidental or unintentional display of sexual content. It is the thrill of a potential slip, an accidental reveal, or an unexpected moment that adds to the excitement and engagement of the audience. For instance, some creators, particularly men, may perform jumping jacks in basketball shorts without wearing underwear, enticing viewers with the suggestion of what may lie beneath. Similarly, women may engage in yoga or stretching exercises while wearing translucent leggings, or wear shirts that "accidentally" unbutton throughout a live stream, creating a sense of tantalizing vulnerability. The accidental reveal is rarely ever recognized in the content. These subtle yet suggestive acts play into the viewer's imagination and desire, leaning on the subjective interpretation of what is considered sexual or enticing.

Besides the prohibited, voyeuristic, accidentalism, and amateur elements underlying seductive sexual content on TikTok, the style of content is also influenced by the myriad interactive challenges, trends, and scripts that circulate on TikTok. These #SpicyTrends, for example, demonstrate the performative nature of sexualized content as an attention-grabbing, repurposing and collapsing of context strategy. One such challenge is the "Silhouette Challenge," wherein participants use red lighting and strategic camera angles to create alluring silhouettes of their bodies, often accompanied by seductive music (Strapagiel, 2021). The challenge provides an opportunity for users to showcase their figures in a

suggestive and tantalizing manner, emphasizing curves and movements. In terms of trends, seductive and provocative sexual content, for instance, extends clothing trends to become clothing-malfunction trends, that tap into strategic costuming as a performance to create contexts (like a “nip-slip” or “fallout”) for eliciting sexual attraction and allure.

Most notably in the context of clothing malfunctions on TikTok is the "grey sweatpants season" trend. Observed in the study, this exemplifies the platform's fascination with the tantalizing interplay of clothing and the body (Centrone, 2023). In this trend, creators, often men, perform wearing form-fitting grey sweatpants to accentuate their physique, especially emphasizing the visual outline of the penis, colloquially referred to as "visual penis lines" (VPL). This trend, which began on TikTok, acquired such cultural prominence in 2020 that it even became the subject of global fashion commentary, with GQ magazine publishing an article titled “How Gray Sweatpants Became the Unofficial Symbol of Fall Horniness” (Berlinger, 2020). Another observed example of these trends was the "sundress" challenge, which featured creators, often women, wearing lightweight, flowing sundresses that both concealed and revealed the body's contours (Kibbe, 2021). The videos often capture moments of twirling, dancing, and flirtation, as creators playfully interact with the fabric's translucence and movement to create a context of sensuality through clothing-malfunction.

The seductive and provocative sexual content genre extends far beyond clothing trends and malfunctions. It encompasses an array of creative expressions that incorporate sexual elements of performativity with the intent of seduction or provocation. Collectively, these sexual contexts, interactive challenges, trends, and performances demonstrate how TikTok has become a dynamic stage for the erotic sexuality, where creators use different elements to craft compelling narratives and contexts of allure and desire. The platform's short-form video format, paired with its creative tools, such as music, filters, and transitions, allows creators to construct highly stylized and intentional portrayals of desirability that resonate with audiences. However, it is important to acknowledge that this strategic performance of sexual expression is made to exist within the boundaries of content moderation and distribution. The policies and practices implemented by TikTok shape the cultural norms and expressions of sexuality by

mediating the types and forms of erotic content that can be shared on the platform. Creators engage in a form of boundary work, navigating the fine line between pushing the limits of creative expression and adhering to community guidelines. This dynamic necessitates a delicate balance, leading to implicit or explicit self-censorship to conform to the platform's standards, which may limit the depiction of explicit or overtly sexual content. As a result, creators often imply or suggest eroticism rather than explicitly depicting it, influencing the possibilities and expressions of the erotic within this unique stage-set context and performance.

Before moving on, it must be acknowledged that the prevalence of seductive and provocative sexual content on TikTok prompts critical reflection on the impact and implications of such content, inviting a deeper exploration of how platforms both influence and are influenced by shifting cultural understandings of sexuality. While this content empowers some users to embrace and celebrate their sexuality, it simultaneously raises concerns regarding the sexualization of social media content and the potential normalization of hyper-sexualized behaviours (Kelly, 2022). This phenomenon, often characterized as the "pornification" of social media or "raunch culture" (Barton, 2021), involves content that, although not explicitly pornographic, may bear aesthetic and stylistic resemblances to decontextualized porn videos. As a result, users' everyday experiences on TikTok encompass a diverse range of content that blends the ordinary and mundane with the hyper-sexualized and fetishized, giving rise to a hybrid performance that characterizes a genre commonly referred to as "fetish content."

This blending of explicitly erotic and non-explicit erotic content is further exemplified by the cross-platformization of TikTok videos onto porn websites. On one hand, the distinct category of "TikTok porn" has emerged as a result, with the inclusion of "TikTok porn" as a searchable category on popular porn websites, showcasing the wide-reaching influence of TikTok in the adult entertainment industry. This phenomenon shows how TikTok's innovative content distribution model and its unique horizontal framing have been adopted by various porn websites, as they seek to replicate the structure and functionality that have contributed to TikTok's success (Wired, 2021). By incorporating elements of TikTok's format and style, these websites tap into the appeal and familiarity that TikTok offers to its

users, blurring the boundaries between mainstream social media content and adult-oriented material. The presence of "TikTok porn" as a distinct category reflects the platform's significant impact on shaping contemporary digital erotica and its integration into the broader landscape of pornographic content consumption. As TikTok continues to shape and redefine the landscape of sexual expression, further exploration and analysis of its implications and consequences are necessary to inform ethical considerations and guidelines for creators, viewers, and platform operators.

5.3. Community-Driven Contexts: Colluded Contextualized Content from Distinct Sexual Communities

Transitioning from the general sexual content typology on TikTok–which encompasses education, entertainment, expression, advocacy, and seduction and provocation–- this section now considers the powerful influence of community-dynamics on sexual content creation. Within the vast landscape of sexual content on TikTok, notable findings emerged, revealing distinct sexual communities that revolve around specific cultural contexts, practices, symbols, and identities. While a range of sexual content forms were identified within these user-generated contexts, both non-erotic and erotic in nature, it became clear that the sex work community and the kink and fetish community stood out with their unique style and characteristics. What set these two content networks apart was their ability to extend beyond their individual communities and intersect with the broader network of content networks previously described. In other words, these content networks were *networks of networks*, forming content superstructures that encompassed various categories of sexual content discussed in the general sexual content typology.

Within the kink and fetish content network superstructure, for instance, there were many interconnected content networks that revolved around specific kinks and fetishes, such as a foot fetish content network or a BDSM network. However, each of these networks had its own unique contexts and cultural symbols, identities, and performances, which were deeply rooted in the specific practices and interests of the respective kink or fetish. Despite the diversity of content networks within the kink and fetish content superstructure, they were united by the colluded context that emerged across the content,

linking them through shared cultural symbols, identities, and performances that were grounded in the practices and interests of the respective kink or fetish. This colluded context facilitated a sense of connection and community, allowing creators and audiences to navigate and take part in the broader superstructure while maintaining their unique expressions and experiences within their specific networks.

Similarly, within the sex work content superstructure, there was a multitude of interconnected content networks representing different actors and perspectives related to sex work. This included content creators who were sex workers themselves, as well as advocates, organizations, former sex workers, customers, and audiences interested in this line of work. Each of these actors contributed to the creation of content that fell within the five general categories of sexual content, namely education, seduction, expression, advocacy, and entertainment. However, within each category, there were distinct cultures, identities, and performances that reflected the diverse range of experiences and perspectives within the sex work community. Despite the diverse range of content networks within the sex work content superstructure, they were interconnected by the colluded context that emerged across the content, bridging the various actors and perspectives related to sex work. Whether they were content creators who were sex workers, advocates, organizations, former sex workers, customers, or interested audiences, each contributed to the creation of content that encompassed the general categories of sexual content.

In short, despite the diversity within these two content networks, or content superstructures, they all converged under a colluded context that emerged because of content moderation and platform governance opposing sex work and kink and fetish practices. This colluded context, which sometimes overlapped but in many ways was distinct across superstructures, was reflected in the social and technical means used by creators and communities to navigate and subvert these oppositions, often through the use of language, symbols, and subverted performances. For example, within both content superstructures, creators employed coded language and symbols like specific emojis or colour-coded accessories to signal their involvement in the community. They strategically crafted performances that pushed the boundaries of content moderation guidelines, balancing between explicit expression and suggestive subtlety. In both cases, these colluded contexts served as a unifying force, bringing together creators who shared similar

experiences, challenges, and goals within their respective communities. It provided a platform for collective action, resistance against marginalization, and the expression of shared cultural symbols and identities. Through their content, creators in these networks challenged societal norms, dismantled stereotypes, and advocated for change, all while navigating the constraints imposed by content moderation policies. They used their creativity and ingenuity to maintain visibility and engage with their audience, finding innovative ways to subvert the limitations imposed by the platform. In doing so, they not only fostered a sense of community and solidarity but also contributed to the broader cultural landscape by challenging dominant narratives and redefining societal perceptions of sexuality, identity, and personal expression.

This section delves into an exploration of these contextualized expressions within the distinct sexual communities, shedding light on the vibrant and diverse manifestations of community-driven sexual content on TikTok. However, before moving on it is important to note that the previously discussed general content categories are also significantly influenced by communities, as creators within these niches often gather around shared interests, identities, or objectives. For example, this was seen in the educational category, where medical professionals may use a common coded language and specific terminology to disseminate accurate sexual health information, or in the advocacy category, where creators use the affordances of the platform for community organization, challenging social norms, and mobilizing support for sexual rights and inclusivity. These community-driven dynamics contribute to the rich tapestry of sexual content on TikTok, highlighting the intersection of personal expression, social change, and collective empowerment within the diverse sexual communities and content networks.

The significance of community dynamics and colluded sexual contexts was particularly pronounced in the networks of sex work content and kink and fetish content on TikTok. These communities operate within a broader social context that is marked by marginalization, stigmatization, and the need for spaces of affirmation and support. Through their colluded sexual contexts, creators and participants in these communities not only find solidarity and empowerment but also challenge the status quo, assert their agency, and celebrate their sexual identities. This collective resistance and subversion of

societal norms may be theorized as a response to the systemic marginalization and silencing of these communities in mainstream discourse and traditional social institutions.

Within the sex work content network, for instance, the colluded context provides a platform for sex workers to advocate for their rights, challenge harmful stereotypes, and amplify their voices. They utilize the shared cultural symbols, language, and performative strategies within this context to create awareness, educate the public, and support one another. This colluded context empowers sex workers to reclaim their narratives and push back against the societal stigma associated with their profession. Similarly, within the kink and fetish content network, the colluded context allows individuals to explore and express their diverse kinks and fetishes in a supportive and non-judgmental environment. This context fosters a sense of belonging and community, where individuals can share their experiences, exchange knowledge, and celebrate their shared interests. Through colluding on shared symbols, codes, and performative practices, participants in this network can engage in playful and erotic expressions of their sexuality while challenging societal taboos and misconceptions surrounding kink and fetish practices.

In both these communities, the colluded sexual contexts serve as transformative spaces that challenge the dominant narratives and power structures that perpetuate marginalization and shame. They provide avenues for community-building, collective action, and the formation of new identities and cultural expressions. By embracing their colluded sexual contexts, creators and participants within these networks push the boundaries of acceptability, reclaim their agency, and contribute to the broader discourse on sexuality, consent, and sexual freedom. That element in particular is the community dynamic that binds them.

By recognizing and exploring these intersections within the communities of kink and fetish content on TikTok, researchers, content moderators, and users can develop a deeper understanding of the diverse expressions of sexual interests and preferences. These communities have utilitarian properties that foster a sense of recognition and self-actualization, acceptance, education, and shared experiences among individuals. Creators within these networks often collaborate, exchange ideas, and actively engage with

their audiences to promote understanding, consent, and responsible and ethical sexual expressions and identities. But they do so utilizing the technical affordances and features of the platform to engage in unique practices that are specific to their community context.

5.3.a. Fetish and Kink Content

Kink and fetish content networks on TikTok is driven by vibrant and engaged communities that centre around exploring and celebrating diverse sexual interests and preferences. Kink and fetish content on TikTok, broadly speaking, refers to a diverse range of sexual content that explores and celebrates niche sexual preferences and practices. This content constitutes a complex, vibrant, and often controversial category of sexual content generated and driven by the respective communities who make up this content superstructure. This content category is built upon the performance, exploration, and representation of niche sexual preferences and practices, encompassing a wide range of interests from BDSM, foot, armpit, and belly fetishes to the realms of latex and rubber, leather, and other distinctive kinks. Additionally, it encompasses more thematic practices such as sexual parasocial relationships, virtual partnerships, petplay, age-play, financial domination, "spicy" cosplay, and more.

A broader community tends to exist across these niche sexual preferences and practices, but each niche sexual preference and practice forms its own unique community, though these often overlap and share common elements. Here, the term 'community' refers to a more intimate and interconnected web of relationships among creators, their content, audience interactions, and the socio-cultural norms that both influence and are influenced by these interactions. These communities represent dynamic, collaborative ecosystems where shared meanings, practices, and community-specific understandings come together. This convergence significantly impacts how sexual content is produced, perceived, and governed within the digital space.

For instance, within the BDSM community on TikTok, there exists a rich tapestry of interests, with some individuals simultaneously engaging in both bondage and financial domination. This creates not just a network but a vibrant community, where shared interests and practices foster interconnected

conversations and experiences. These shared spaces encourage a deeper sense of belonging and identity among community members. Similarly, the intersection between the pet play and cosplay communities illustrates how overlapping interests can give rise to unique cultural expressions. Individuals in these communities often engage in complex role-playing scenarios that blend animalistic and character-based themes, creating a rich, shared cultural tapestry that is distinctly community-oriented.

Such intersections and overlaps within these sexual content communities on TikTok lead to the creation of dynamic, multifaceted networked environments. These spaces are not just about content sharing; they are hubs of collaboration, dialogue, and exploration, deeply rooted in the shared experiences and identities of community members. They foster a sense of belonging and collective identity, contributing to a robust and diverse kink and fetish ecosystem. These communities, with their unique dynamics and shared interests, play a crucial role in shaping the broader discourse and understanding of sexuality and sexual expression on digital platforms. The diversity and complexity of these communities contribute to the richness of the content, as creators and viewers alike find spaces for self-expression, education, connection, and celebration of their unique sexual interests and identities.

It is important to recognize that the kink and fetish community is not a single monolithic entity, but rather a complex amalgamation of distinct content networks marked by unique kinks and fetishes that intersect and the communities that are established around them. For instance, there are communities dedicated to specific fetishes such as foot fetish, BDSM, pet play, or latex enthusiasts. Each of these communities develops its own unique culture, norms, and practices that revolve around the particular fetish they embrace. They foster a sense of belonging and shared interest among individuals who resonate with those specific kinks and fetishes. By creating and sharing content that explores their chosen fetish, these communities contribute to the larger tapestry of kink and fetish content on TikTok.

While the overall community represents a collective celebration of diverse sexual interests and preferences, or kinks and fetishes, it is important to recognize that each part of it is uniquely driven by the specific community dynamics related to a particular kink or fetish that get reflected back in content. The foot fetish community, for example, may create content that highlights the aesthetics of feet, or explores

different foot-related fantasies, or biological explanations for pedal attraction. At the same time, the BDSM community may produce content that delves into the dynamics of power exchange and the exploration of bondage and discipline. Though very distinct content networks, they often intertwine, creating a rich and multifaceted tapestry that reflects the diverse landscape of kink and fetish interests within the broader context of TikTok. These intersections--where different content types and communities converge--foster a shared understanding and connection despite their distinct focuses. For instance, the foot fetish and BDSM communities, although centred around different kinks, share commonalities in their experiences, challenges, and perceptions. While some intersections among various sexual interest communities on social media may represent the multifaceted nature of human sexuality, a significant commonality is their navigation through a shared language, shaped by the platform's content moderation and community guidelines. These guidelines often impose restrictions and present challenges due to the perceived 'taboo' nature of their content.

Communities such as those centered around foot fetish and BDSM frequently face common misunderstandings, discrimination, and marginalization. These challenges are not merely a result of platform policies but also stem from broader societal stigmas and misconceptions about their interests and practices. For example, the foot fetish community may face scrutiny and judgment due to societal norms around feet being considered "unusual" or "weird" as objects of desire. Similarly, the BDSM community grapples with societal misconceptions that portray their practices as abusive or non-consensual, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and misinterpretations. Despite these challenges and misconceptions, the foot fetish and BDSM communities find solidarity and support within the broader kink and fetish content ecosystem on TikTok. Similar to the broader community of sex workers on the platform, these groups form a content community that is loosely structured yet deeply engaged in meaningful interactions. They participate in rich conversations, share experiences, and collaboratively create content that is rooted in a community-driven context. Within these intersecting spaces, a strong sense of community is fostered, uniting individuals from diverse and often marginalized sexual interests and backgrounds. Together, they find common ground in their shared experiences of misunderstanding and marginalization. This collective

effort not only strengthens their sense of belonging but also works actively towards dismantling societal barriers and promoting broader acceptance and understanding.

In another case observed during the study, the furry community exemplifies the interplay of diverse sexual expressions within a community-driven content network. The furry community is a diverse group of individuals who have a shared interest in anthropomorphic animal characters, often depicted through intricate animal costumes. During the course of the study, it was seen that this community content network generated a diverse range of sexual content categories pertaining to the community, employing a variety of creative mediums including performance, art, and a fusion of both. It is important to note, the sexual aspect of 'furry fandom' does not represent the community as a whole, as many individuals engage in the furry community purely for non-sexual reasons, driven by creativity, camaraderie, and self-expression. Therefore, sexual fetish and attraction are sometimes but not always a part of the furry identity and performance, and the content extends much beyond explicit eroticism. Some creators within the furry community on TikTok often share educational content or social commentary that aims to debunk misconceptions and promote understanding of the furry subculture. They may provide insights into the creative process of designing fursonas (personalized furry characters), discuss the historical origins of the furry fandom, or offer tutorials on costume making and character performance. These educational, advocating videos are a major part of the furry content landscape; and they often contribute to fostering a sense of community identity, empowering individuals to express their unique interests and engage in positive self-representation.

Moreover, the furry content network on TikTok incorporates entertaining content that showcases creative expressions of the furry lifestyle. Creators take part in challenges and trends, such as "fursona reveals" or "fursuit dance-offs," where they showcase their costumes, engage in imaginative role-playing, or share comedic skits. These videos not only entertain the community but also serve as a means of connecting with others who share similar interests and experiences. Creators share personal stories, poems, and artwork that convey their emotions, struggles, and aspirations within the furry community. They may explore themes of self-discovery, self-acceptance, and the power of imagination. By embracing

their furry identity, these creators use TikTok as a platform for self-expression and for connecting with like-minded individuals who appreciate and support their journey.

In addition to the educational, expressive, and entertaining aspects of furry content on TikTok, the study did reveal a strong presence of seductive and provocative sexual content related to the furry community. At times, this content was overly sexual. However, at other times, this content emerged through the colluded contextual collapsing of educational, expressive, and advocative contexts into a sexualized form. For example, creators may combine educational content about 'fursona design' with seductive poses or suggestive captions, blurring the line between informative and erotic content. Similarly, furry-related expressive kink and fetish content exploring personal stories and emotions within the furry community and context were sometimes layered with sexual undertones or explicit imagery; tapping into the sensual aspect of furry self-expression. These examples illustrate how the diverse nature of furry content on TikTok facilitates the simultaneous presence of various modes of artistic representation, such as those that are alluring and provocative, within the wider scope of furry identity and the cultivation of a sense of community.

The empirical examples drawn from TikTok's furry communities are representative of the broader landscape of kink and fetish content communities on the platform. These examples serve as critical reminders of the inadequacies inherent in overly simplistic categorizations and the problematic nature of collapsing diverse contexts in the governance of sexual content. Such instances underscore the vital need to acknowledge and respect the varied purposes and expressions unique to each specific community.

The examination of fetish and kink content on TikTok, viewed through this lens, reveals a rich and complex categorization of sexual content. This categorization is anchored in the exploration and representation of niche sexual practices and preferences within the community. Rather than reducing this content to simplistic categorizations of erotic or non-erotic, the comprehensive typological framework recognizes the diverse range of purposes, intentions, and performances present in fetish and kink content. It acknowledges the interplay between community dynamics, personal expression, education,

entertainment, and the fostering of a sense of belonging within the community. By embracing this nuanced understanding, content governance practices can move away from a narrow focus on individual creators and their behaviour. Instead, attention can be directed towards developing responsible and inclusive approaches that respect the diversity of sexual expressions and the unique dynamics of specific content networks. Such an approach allows for a more accurate representation of sexual content on TikTok and promotes a platform environment that values diversity, supports personal expression, and encourages meaningful and responsible engagement with sexual content.

In line with this framework, the study found kink and fetish content to encompass five distinct, yet interrelated, subset content networks: educational content; entertainment content; expressive content; advocacy content; and seductive and provocative content. Each subset of the network contributes uniquely to the context, performance, representation, exploration, and discourse surrounding fetish and kink within TikTok's content networks. First, the study identified a significant subset of educational content in kink and fetish content. Creators within these communities employed a range of afforded mechanisms to effectively deliver educational kink and fetish content. By leveraging the visual nature of the TikTok platform, they showed techniques and practices associated with fetish and kink activities, bringing them to life for viewers. Step-by-step tutorials or visual guides showcased aspects like bondage ties or impact play, offering practical knowledge and guidance. This content context played a crucial role in promoting safe, consensual, and responsible engagement in various fetish and kink practices. Beyond the immediate practices, creators also dedicated their content to educating viewers about the history and cultural context of kink. They explored into the origins of specific fetishes, explored different subcultures within the kink community, and discussed the importance of consent, communication, and safety protocols. These educational videos, ultimately, served as valuable resources for both newcomers and those seeking a deeper understanding of kink, fostering an environment of learning and appreciation.

Similar to the previous education content category discussed, the short-form video format of TikTok helped kink and fetish creators facilitate concise explanations and demonstrations, allowing them to distill complex information into easily digestible content. By employing affordances like captions, on-

screen text, and visual cues, for instance, they enhance viewers' understanding and engagement with the educational material. Moreover, creators leveraged the interactive features of TikTok to foster engagement, facilitate dialogue, and build a sense of community around educational content. The comments section became a space for viewers to ask questions, share their own experiences, and engage in thoughtful discussions about the educational material. By responding to comments and addressing inquiries, creators furthered the educational discourse and created an environment of collective learning and growth. Furthermore, kink and fetish creators actively encouraged viewers to explore further by providing references to books, articles, and online resources that offered in-depth information about kink practices and their historical and cultural significance.

Educational kink and fetish content on TikTok distinguish themselves from the previously described general category of educational sexual content by their community-driven nature and the unique elements that shape their context. Unlike broader educational content that may cover a range of sexual topics, educational kink and fetish content centres around specific kinks or fetishes, creating a more focused and specialized discourse. These communities foster a sense of belonging and shared interest, drawing upon cultural and context-specific elements that define the particular kink or fetish being explored. For example, within the TikTok fetish and kink community, creators dedicated to the exploration of BDSM practices often incorporate unique audio and visual performative elements that are not only characteristic of this specific kink but also the communities built around it. They might emphasize aspects such as power dynamics, consent, and the use of various tools or techniques. By centring their content around these elements, creators not only educate viewers about the practices themselves but also delve into the cultural and context-specific nuances that shape the sex-centric community.

In one case example observed, a creator within the BDSM community focused on educating viewers about rope bondage. Through a series of videos, they showed different knot-tying techniques, emphasized safety considerations, and explained the significance of consent within rope bondage play. What made this educational content distinct, however, was the incorporation of cultural and context-

specific elements, such as the Japanese art of *Shibari*. *Shibari*, also known as *Kinbaku*, is a traditional Japanese form of rope bondage that has deep historical and artistic roots within the BDSM community. In the content, the creator highlighted the cultural significance of *Shibari* by exploring its origins and its place within the broader BDSM community. They explained the historical context of *Shibari*, explaining its roots and its evolution as both a form of erotic expression and a means of communication between partners. By showcasing *Shibari*'s artistic aspects in an educative sex-centric context, the creator emphasized the beauty and aesthetic appeal of the intricate rope patterns and the visual aesthetic they create. Moreover, the content went beyond mere technical instruction by incorporating the cultural and context-specific elements associated with Shibari. The creator discussed the importance of mindfulness, trust, and communication within Shibari scenes, reflecting the values and principles that underpin this particular form of rope bondage. They also touched upon the concept of Kinbaku, which emphasizes the emotional connection between the "rigger" (person tying the ropes) and the model, and how this connection is central to the Shibari experience.

Empirical observations of this educational kink and fetish content piece on TikTok reveal a nuanced approach that extends beyond basic instructional videos. This content integrates cultural elements and historical practices pertinent to specific sexual contexts, offering a rich, contextually informed perspective. For example, analysis of this series of TikTok videos on BDSM practices demonstrates how creators weave in historical narratives and cultural significances, providing viewers with a deeper understanding of the roots and evolution of these practices. Data collected from viewer interactions and feedback on these videos suggest that such comprehensive and culturally sensitive education is contributing notably to the exploration of kink and fetish practices on the platform. Viewer comments indicate an increased appreciation for the diversity of experiences within kink and fetish communities, hinting at an expansion in the collective understanding of these practices. The empirical evidence suggests that educational content on TikTok, particularly in the realm of kink and fetish, is not merely instructional but an immersive cultural and historical exploration.

Moreover, the community-driven nature of educational kink and fetish content on TikTok is evidenced by the focused engagement of viewers and creators alike. An analysis of interaction patterns within these communities indicates a strong sense of belonging and shared knowledge. The content, characterized by its specificity to particular kinks or fetishes, is shown to foster cultural understanding and community solidarity on the platform. For instance, a thematic analysis of comments and discussions on the previously described videos related to rope bondage illustrates how creators not only share practical knowledge but also engage viewers in discussions about the cultural and historical aspects of the practice. This participatory approach has been observed to encourage further exploration and understanding among viewers, fostering supportive communities that celebrate the diversity and richness of kink and fetish.

Besides educational kink and fetish content, there was found to be a range of 'seductive and provocative kink and fetish content' on TikTok. This sexual content sub-category of kink and fetish content in particular thrives on TikTok, through the repeated context of the exploration and celebration of unconventional sources of sexual arousal. One example is content focused on feet fetish. Creators may produce videos showcasing foot teasing, where they display their feet in a seductive manner, emphasizing the curves, arches, and textures to evoke desire and fascination. These videos may incorporate elements such as toe wiggling, foot jewellery, or visually pleasing foot-focused aesthetics to create a seductive atmosphere that captivates foot fetish enthusiasts. Another example is belly fetish content, which revolves around the appreciation and attraction towards bellies. Creators in this niche produce videos featuring belly dancing, belly button play, or role-playing scenarios centred around the belly. These videos employ seductive movements, alluring clothing, and close-up shots to highlight the eroticism of the belly area.

What sets these seductive and provocative contexts apart is their ability to tap into unconventional sources of sexual pleasure and engage audiences through unique forms of stimulation. As a result, the nature of fetish and kink content that sexualize body parts not traditionally seen as sexual poses unique challenges for content moderation on TikTok. Because of the subjective nature of these fetishes and the blurred boundaries between erotic and non-erotic contexts, enforcing consistent guidelines becomes

difficult. Consequently, this type of content falls into a grey area where moderation is rarely implemented, allowing for its proliferation on the platform. Furthermore, the fact that this content can be considered an erotic performance adds to its popularity, especially when creators use it as a "thirst-trapping" strategy. By strategically incorporating elements of foot fetish, belly fetish, or other unconventional sources of sexual arousal, creators can perform a sexualized context that falls well within the community guidelines. This strategy effectively captures attention, generates engagement, and attracts a significant following. As a result, it is not uncommon to find creators from various backgrounds, including mainstream creators, intentionally showcasing their feet, bellies, or other fetishized body parts to acquire visibility and promote their content.

While these fetishes and kinks have existed long before TikTok, the platform's environmental conditions have contributed to their heightened visibility and prominence (Grant, 2022). The hyper-fetishization and normalization of sexual scripts and performances on TikTok, as well as on many other social media platforms, in some ways can be attributed to the platform's content distribution algorithm and its participatory culture (Kelly, 2022). This system prioritizes and amplifies content that effectively captures attention and engagement, contributing to the widespread dissemination of these previously niche sexual practices. In pursuit of maximizing their visibility and attention, creators may employ strategies that involve using fetishized themes and undertones within their content. For example, creators were observed strategically featuring their feet, armpits, or bellies in provocative ways that evoke a sexual response from viewers. This deliberate inclusion of non-traditional erogenous zones as sexual focal points allowed the creators to cater to specific fetishes and kinks, creating content that is highly appealing to those who possess these particular interests.

This strategic use of non-traditional body parts as a means of seduction and provocation offers a way to perform a sexualized context that is well within the community guidelines of TikTok. While explicit nudity or explicit sexual acts are prohibited, the sensual and suggestive display of non-traditional body parts allows creators to push boundaries while still operating within the platform's content moderation policies. This approach has proven to be highly effective in attracting attention, generating

engagement, and ultimately increasing the visibility and reach of creators within TikTok's ecosystem. As a result, and once again, it is not uncommon to see a wide range of creators, including mainstream influencers, intentionally incorporating elements of foot fetish, armpit fetish, or belly fetish content into their videos as part of a "thirst-trapping" strategy. By appealing to these specific fetishes and kinks, creators can tap into existing communities and attract a dedicated fan base, and they can do so without worrying about violating the content guidelines. This practice of catering to niche sexual interests becomes a successful formula for content creation and audience engagement on TikTok.

For example, the study identified a thriving content genre within the TikTok community centred around superhero cosplay, where creators embody the personas of iconic characters such as Spider-Man, Wonder Woman, or Batman. Creators within this genre meticulously craft elaborate costumes, mimicking the appearance and mannerisms of their favourite superheroes. This content genre attracts a wide audience, ranging from comic book enthusiasts to casual viewers appreciating the creativity and dedication involved in these cosplays. However, the study also revealed a fascinating phenomenon where some kink and fetish enthusiasts, particularly within the rubber and latex communities, repurpose this context to explore their own kinks and fetishes. In this reimagined context, creators appropriate the cosplay niche by integrating fetish elements of rubber and latex materials into their superhero cosplays, transforming the conventional superhero narrative into a sensual and fetishistic experience. They use body language and movements in their performances to convey a subtle sensuality, emphasizing the tightness and shine of the rubber or latex garments. Props such as whips, restraints, or masks may be incorporated, further alluding to BDSM or dominance/submission dynamics. Beyond the visual aspects, these creators employ coded language and suggestive gestures in their captions and comments, to signal their engagement in fetishistic practices, appealing to a niche audience with this cosplay niche that understands the underlying meaning.

The growing normalization of fetish and kink content on TikTok has been a catalyst for an increasing number of creators to engage in similar content production, thus perpetuating a cycle that further cements its presence on the platform. This trend towards greater visibility and prominence of

sexualized content, however, presents significant challenges for the platform's content moderation policies. Stricter moderation efforts risk intensifying the marginalization of communities involved in sexual content creation, sparking debates over the limits of acceptable content and its implications for freedom of expression. Despite these challenges, it's important to recognize that fetishes and kinks have always been integral to human sexuality. Yet, the distinct environment of TikTok has notably amplified their visibility and facilitated the normalization of various sexual scripts and performances. The platform's unique combination of a powerful content distribution algorithm, a vibrant participatory culture, and community-driven content generation has fostered a conducive space where fetish and kink content not only thrive but also garners widespread attention and engagement. This phenomenon underscores a significant shift in the digital landscape, reflecting how social media platforms like TikTok are reshaping the public discourse and perception of sexual expression.

Despite the constraints of TikTok's content moderation policies, some sexual content creators ingeniously straddle the line between explicit fetish and kink elements and the platform's guidelines, performing in content that remains within the bounds of acceptability. By merging the aesthetics and allure of superhero culture with the sensual world of kink and fetish, these creators tap into the desires and fantasies of their audience while maintaining a sense of playfulness and creativity. The combination of social dynamics within the rubber and latex communities and the technical capabilities of TikTok enable this reimagined content genre to thrive, offering a unique and expressive space for individuals to explore and celebrate their kinks and fetishes within the confines of the platform's moderation context. This repurposing of the superhero cosplay context within the rubber and latex communities showcases the intersection of creativity, identity expression, sexual exploration, and content moderation. It highlights the unique ability of TikTok's platform and its technical affordances to provide a space where kink and fetish enthusiasts can find resonance and connection with others who share similar interests.

The findings suggest that the performative aspect of fetish and kink content on TikTok is far from merely theatrical. Instead, it constitutes a complex web of digital interaction and subcultural expression that forges an integral component of the creators' and communities' online identities and separates them

from the general user base. A key method by which this distinction is maintained is through the representation of symbols, which are incorporated into colluded contexts, characterized by intentionally designed performances and types of content creation. For instance, notable within the kink and fetish community are symbolic artifacts such as leather, latex, bondage gear, collars, costuming and role-play attire, and masks; which function as semiotic codes that reflect the community's shared preferences and interests. Leather, for example, is not just material but a potent symbol that denotes a variety of kinks and fetishes, specifically the leather community. In this sense, the use of leather clothing in the kink and fetish community transcends its physical attributes, often representing power, dominance, and control, hence signifying key dynamics within BDSM practices. Moreover, the symbolic ties of leather to certain sexual identities and communities, like the leather subculture in the LGBTQ+ community, underscore its role as a visual and tactile emblem of sexual expression and belonging. These symbols, however, extend beyond mere representation. They operate as community indicators, helping members to identify each other and solidify the bond within this subculture. Whether used in educational, advocative, expressive, or entertainment-oriented content, these symbols serve as emblems of the kink and fetish community, enhancing community-driven identification.

Nevertheless, the sexualization of these symbols presents a paradox. Despite their use in non-erotic contexts, the inherent sexual connotations these symbols carry have led to their content being frequently deplatformed. For example, even when used in an educational context or as a community emblem, the symbol of leather is frequently misconstrued by those external to the community. These individuals often interpret its usage solely through its explicit sexual connotations, overlooking its value as a community identifier and instead viewing it predominantly as a brazen display of public sexual behaviour. As a result, content that incorporates such symbolically charged material often encounters limitations under platform moderation policies designed to restrict overtly sexual content. Regardless of the non-sexual contexts in which these symbols may be employed—be it education, advocacy, or personal expression—their perceived sexualization imposes restrictions that curtail their full utility as communicative tools within the community. This consequently poses significant challenges to the visible

presence and expansion of the kink and fetish community, as the potential for educational and advocative dialogues becomes stifled by policies that fail to differentiate between different usage contexts of these sexual symbols.

The constraints imposed by platform governance practices on TikTok, while challenging, have catalyzed an innovative adaptation within the kink and fetish community's content production practices. Considering these challenges, creators within the kink and fetish community have shown remarkable adaptability, effectively repurposing the technical features and affordances of the platform to ensure the survival and growth of their content. This survival is essentially tied to their ability to navigate the platform's policies and infrastructure, transforming them to fit their unique content purposes and production practices.

Community-driven participatory adaptation is vividly clear in the development of distinct, subversive languages that creatively utilize platform affordances and features (such as text, emojis, code words, etc.) to communicate topics and deliver performances associated with kink and fetish. This language, forged in an environment of material constraint, encodes a tapestry of knowledges, experiences, and identities within its subtext. This innovative discourse enables creators to circumvent the platform's content restrictions and governance, while continuing to educate, advocate, and express themselves within the community’s colluded context. This subversive language effectively allows the community to maintain its, both erotic and non-erotic, user-generated contexts and the participatory dialogues that stem from them–demonstrating a resilient response to the platform's inability to differentiate these contexts.

In sum, in their quest to represent their unique identities and interests, the kink and fetish community have collectively adopted a sophisticated blend of subversion and creativity in their content production practices. This shared strategic maneuvering is a testament to the community-driven knowledge exchange that enables these creators to effectively utilize the technical affordances of the platform. These include the use of lighting, shadow effects, colour symbolism, cutting and editing techniques, and camera angles to construct content. Additionally, soundscapes have become an integral part of the community's shared narrative, presenting an innovative blend of auditory aesthetics that

resonate with the kink and fetish identities. Creators have skillfully incorporated suggestive noises, coded phrases, and specific music genres into their content, crafting a unique soundscape that transcends the visual narrative.

Besides the broader auditory elements, kink and fetish creators have also tapped into community-specific mimetic sounds and associated scripts to further enrich their content. For example, they often incorporate the sound of a whip crack or the clinking of chains, which are instantly recognizable within the community, evoking specific kinks and fetish themes. Similarly, they use coded phrases like "SSC" (Safe, Sane, Consensual) or "RACK" (Risk-Aware Consensual Kink) as shorthand for important principles and values, fostering a sense of shared understanding and belonging among community members. While these can communicate intent, set the mood, and hint at specific kinks or fetishes, providing an enriched sensory experience that enhances the community's digital presence, this communal and patterned performance and visual, auditory and linguistic culture is at the core of this community's constitution and reproduction.

The performative aspects of the kink and fetish community's content, rooted in the communal and patterned use of symbols and expressions, play a central role in shaping the shared culture and identity of this community. These expressions encompassed not only the visual and auditory components but also the linguistic and mimetic practices that have become ingrained within the community. By collectively using specific sounds, phrases, and music genres, creators tap into a shared lexicon and create a unique communicative framework that is instantly recognizable and relatable within the community. This patterned performance and cultural language not only reflect the community's existing values and interests but also contribute to its ongoing reproduction and evolution. For example, during an interview with a BDSM creator, it was noted:

> *"The way we make our content is a big part of who we are as a community. We have our own language and way of doing things that makes us unique. It's not just about the pictures and sounds we use, but also the words and phrases we say. We have this special way of talking that only we understand. When we make content, we use these special things to show who we are and connect with others like us. It's like having our own secret code that brings us together and helps us express ourselves."*

Analyzing the dynamics within the kink and fetish community on TikTok, particularly in light of the quote above, raises profound questions about the essence of community formation in digital spaces. The statement, “The way we make our content is a big part of who we are as a community... It's like having our own secret code that brings us together and helps us express ourselves,” underscores the role of shared practices and symbolic language in community identity. This self-crafted language, consisting of unique visual, auditory, and linguistic elements, is not just a method of communication; it is a fundamental aspect of community identity and cohesion.

The community members, through their distinct content creation style, establish a sense of belonging and collective identity, which transcends the mere use of shared symbols and extends into the realm of shared experiences and understandings. However, this community's identity is not solely self-determined. The algorithms governing TikTok play a significant, albeit less visible, role in shaping the community. These algorithms, by determining what content is visible and what gets suppressed, inadvertently influence the community's boundaries and the nature of its interactions. While the community members actively create and use their unique language to connect and express themselves, the algorithms act as an external force that molds the community's visibility and reach. This interplay suggests that the community's identity on TikTok is a product of both internal dynamics, driven by the creators' shared practices and language, and external influences, dictated by the platform's content moderation algorithms.

In essence, the community within TikTok's kink and fetish sphere is a complex construct, coalesced not just by the creators' shared language and practices but also shaped by the platform's governance mechanisms. The community's identity, therefore, exists at the intersection of self-expression and algorithmic influence, reflecting a nuanced dance between autonomy and platform-driven constraints. This duality highlights the multifaceted nature of community formation in digital spaces, where identity and cohesion are continually negotiated between the creators' agency and the platform's regulatory framework.

5.3.b Sex Work Content

Sex work-related content on TikTok encompassed a broad continuum of performances and representations that reflect the diverse landscape of sex work itself. This content community extends further beyond the boundaries of traditional sex work industries, encompassing a multitude of creators from various backgrounds. This includes (but is not limited to) porn stars, escorts, cam workers, cybersex providers, sugar babies, exotic dancers, street workers, and more. Additionally, the community-driven network of sex work content on TikTok extended to non-sex workers or previous sex workers who share their experiences, agencies that provide platforms for connecting clients and providers, sex work advocates and advocacy organizations, researchers examining the social dynamics of sex work, lawyers advocating for the rights of sex workers, human rights activists fighting against exploitation and stigmatization, and more.

A detailed analysis of the performances and content from a broad array of these creators unveils a tapestry of activities that span educational, entertainment, advocacy, and adult-oriented content. These creators are not only sharing valuable resources on sexual wellness but also offering entertainment through their performances and providing a window into the sex industry. Their content also serves as a platform for advocacy, championing the rights of sex workers and pushing for decriminalization. Additionally, they produce content that caters to adult entertainment seekers, underlining the diverse and multifaceted representation of sex work on TikTok.

Empirical findings from the research suggest that TikTok has become a pivotal platform in the evolution of platform-based sex work, a phenomenon that encapsulates the integration of sex work into digital environments, spurred by technological advancements and shifting societal perceptions of sexuality. The data reveals that on TikTok, sex workers engage in a variety of platform-based activities. They range from advertising in-person services to providing at-a-distance interactive experiences via webcamming and messaging services. Furthermore, they promote consumable sexual content, such as videos and explicit photos, and manage subscription-based interactions through services like Only Fans, which underscore the development of parasocial sexual relationships. These activities highlight the

innovative ways in which sex workers leverage TikTok's features to expand their reach, engage with diverse audiences, and monetize their offerings.

It is important to acknowledge that sex work-related content on TikTok operates within the highly regulated and censored environment and constraints of the platform's content moderation policies, which necessitates adaptive strategies from sex workers to navigate these limitations and present their work within acceptable boundaries when using mainstream social media platforms like TikTok. Drawing parallels between material sex work and platform-based sex work, there are common elements such as the imperative of advertising and audience management. Similar to material sex work, sex workers engaging in platform-based sex work use advertising as a core purpose in their content, as it is crucial for attracting potential clients and promoting their services. However, the advertising layer in platform-based sex work is also a product of the imperative of migration across platforms, driven by the diverse platform contexts and content governance terms that sex workers must navigate. For instance, the empirical data gathered in this study illuminate how, in the face of TikTok's stringent content moderation policies, sex workers ingeniously adapt their online presence. Unable to openly advertise material sexual services, they instead craft content that aligns with the platform's guidelines while subtly signaling their services. The study observed that these creators often post videos that are sensual and seductive, yet carefully calibrated to fit within the terms of moderation, using them as a springboard to direct potential clients to external websites. On these third-party sites, they provide detailed information about bookings, rates, and services.

Throughout the study, it was frequently noted that sex work content creators on TikTok employ a sophisticated array of social and technical strategies to circumvent the platform's limitations. They rely on suggestive body language, carefully chosen attire, and poses designed to allure and suggest, rather than overtly communicate, the nature of their services. Rather than direct promotion, they often resort to coded language—phrases like 'DM for details,' or strategically placed innuendos within video captions or comments—crafting a discreet yet clear signal to prospective clients. This approach not only demonstrates their ability to navigate the platform's regulatory landscape but also underscores a broader trend of resilience and adaptability among online sex work communities. By directing interested

individuals to external platforms or private channels, they provide more explicit information and establish personal connections with potential clients, ensuring a level of privacy and discretion necessary for their line of work. This dynamic exemplifies the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the sex work community in leveraging TikTok as an advertising platform despite the constraints of the platform's content guidelines and the broader legal and social context.

Content related to sex work on TikTok reflects a web of complex dynamics and strategic maneuvers, showcasing the intricate and multifaceted character of sex work practices. These practices weave together both tangible and intangible elements across various platform contexts, illustrating the depth and diversity of the sex work ecosystem within digital spaces. Within this ecosystem, the sex work content community emerges as a diverse yet interconnected network. Creators from different niches—ranging from those offering companionship to others specializing in specific kinks—may differ in their services and audiences, yet they share a common digital tapestry. They are linked through shared content strategies, such as the use of hashtags, trends, and audio tracks that signal membership within this broader community. This interconnectedness not only fosters a sense of solidarity among content creators but also facilitates the sharing of best practices and the formation of a collective identity. Through these content networks, individuals engage with and support one another, navigating the complexities of digital representation and content moderation together.

For example, creators of sex work content on TikTok were observed skillfully incorporating a range of common visual elements and symbols in their content to convey their involvement in the sex work community and effectively appeal to their target audience while circumventing content moderation. These visual cues and symbols go beyond mere provocative outfits or suggestive gestures, encompassing subtle references and clever tactics to navigate the platform's content moderation policies. A notable example is the use of the term "spicy accountant," which has acquired popularity as a euphemism for sex work within the TikTok community. By adopting this signature, creators can allude to their involvement in the sex work industry while maintaining a level of discretion. Besides linguistic codes, the use of emojis and captions plays a significant role in conveying messages and attracting the attention of their

intended audience. Creators strategically employ discreetly placed emojis, such as the pepper emoji, which has become synonymous with sex work on TikTok. This subtle symbol signifies an element of spiciness or excitement associated with their content. Furthermore, the combination of the film camera emoji and the star emoji has emerged as a subtle yet powerful signifier of sex work, hinting at the creation of explicit adult content without explicitly stating it.

The study observed that sex workers employed various performative elements related to prop usage in their content. While explicit nudity or direct sexual acts are generally avoided to comply with content moderation guidelines, creators strategically used symbolic gestures or props to convey the commercial aspect of their work and attract potential clients. Examples include the subtle placement of dollar bills, suggestive hand movements, or flirtatious facial expressions. These elements serve to capture attention and interest without explicitly soliciting or referencing sexual services, allowing creators to navigate the platform's guidelines while still effectively engaging their intended audience. This careful balance of seductive content in sex work, as seen on TikTok, showcases the dual purpose of capturing attention and visibility while employing tactics to redirect it as necessary. These visual elements and symbols create a shared language and cultural currency within the sex work community on TikTok, allowing creators to connect with their audience on a deeper level and resonate with individuals who share similar interests and desires. The strategic use of visual elements and symbols in sex work content on TikTok shows the creativity and resourcefulness of creators in navigating the platform's content guidelines and reaching their target audience. By leveraging these techniques, creators advertise their services, generate interest, and foster a sense of community within the sex work industry on TikTok. It is important to highlight that these tactics require a significant labour to strike the delicate balance between capturing attention and adhering to the platform's guidelines, as the explicit promotion of sexual services is prohibited on TikTok.

Moreover, some sex work content creators on TikTok engage in synchronous seductive content creation through live streaming or video chats, where they interact directly with viewers in real-time. These interactive sessions afford real-time personalized and intimate experience with audiences, in which

the creators tailor their seductive content based on the immediate feedback and desires expressed by their audiences. Semi-synchronous interactive features like duets, reactions, and live streaming heightened engagement also allow for direct interaction and feedback in this manner. Through the technical affordances, creators of seductive sex-work-based content skillfully use social and technical elements of the platform to cultivate parasocial sexual relationships with their audience. Through the sharing of inspirational messages, personal advice, and relatable experiences, for example, they were observed creating an illusion of intimacy and connection with their audience. This was facilitated most often through personalized interactions with audience members, such as comments, direct messages, and content requests. It also occurred on a collective level, in which the creator addressed audiences as a collective body, fostering a sense of para-social closeness and community. It is important to recognize however that these parasocial sexual relationships primarily exist within the digital realm as a mode of advertising, entertainment, and fantasy-fulfillment.

During the study it was observed that sex-work-related content communities on TikTok encompassed a variety of content types beyond seductive and provocative sexual content. This network of content networks, like in the previously described kink and fetish content superstructure, aligned with the broader sexual content typology discussed earlier: educational content, entertainment content, personal expression content, and advocacy content. What sets this content community apart from the general sexual content categories, however, was its strong reliance on community dynamics, which shapes the creation and dissemination of content. At the base of this was a colluded context, which, in the case of sex work content community, refers to a loose agreement and understanding among sex workers regarding the strategies and tactics employed to navigate the platform's content moderation policies and attract clients.

In this context, sex workers, advocates, and former sex workers come together to navigate the platform's guidelines and restrictions. They collude on various fronts, sharing strategies, techniques, and knowledge to ensure their content remains within the confines of moderation policies while still effectively communicating their intended messages. This collaboration extends to discussions on legal issues, safety precautions, consent practices, and community support, creating a collective effort to

protect and uplift the sex work community. The collusion is driven by the recognition that they face similar hurdles and can only thrive by supporting each other in an environment where their content is stigmatized and marginalized. It is through this colluded context that sex workers and their allies find strength, resilience, and the ability to advocate for the rights and well-being of those involved in the industry, while also challenging societal misconceptions and working towards a more inclusive and supportive platform.

Moving on, from educational resources to entertainment, personal expression, and advocacy, the sex work content community on TikTok is actively engaged in producing content that reflects their experiences, challenges stereotypes, and promotes a sense of solidarity. Each content type served distinct purposes within the sex work community and contributed to its community-driven interests. This dynamic community-driven approach contributes to the diverse and nuanced nature of the sex-work-based content network on TikTok. First, the study found that educational sex work content networks on TikTok served as a dynamic platform for sharing valuable knowledge, insights, and resources related to various aspects of sex work in a format that resonated with the TikTok community. Creators representing diverse backgrounds and occupations within the sex work community used this content type and context to educate viewers, including both other sex workers as well as the public, about the industry, the rights and safety of sex workers, consent, and boundaries, navigating legal frameworks, harm reduction strategies, debunking misconceptions surrounding sex work, and many other important community-driven topics. The creators of this content sought to empower individuals engaged in sex work and promote an improved understanding and acceptance of their occupation within the wider society through the provision of informational and instructional material.

The effectiveness of educational sex work content on TikTok, mirroring the broader genre of sexual education on the platform, is marked by the inventive use of personal narratives, specialized knowledge, and narrative techniques. Content creators carefully tailor their material to captivate audiences, imparting educational messages within the constraints of TikTok's preferred amateur aesthetic and brief video format. They employ an array of performance methods, including relatable stories, visual

aids, and concise explanations, to distill complex concepts into digestible and engaging segments. Mirroring the production techniques seen in general sexual education content on TikTok, sex work educators also employ graphics, text overlays, filters, and visual effects to emphasize critical points, provide clarifying context, and craft visually stimulating presentations. By tapping into the platform's array of features and creative tools, these educators amplify the pedagogical value of their content, rendering it not only more visually captivating but also easier to remember.

Engagement with the audience is also central to the creation of educational sex work content on TikTok. Content creators foster a dynamic learning environment by stimulating dialogue, inviting questions, and disseminating further resources. They deepen the viewer's educational journey by interacting with comments, addressing questions, and supplying additional insights or external references. This interactive strategy cultivates a community atmosphere, making viewers feel included and motivated to participate in the educational discourse. Furthermore, the accessibility to and interactions with sex workers on TikTok facilitate a transformative learning experience. It breaks down barriers, allowing viewers direct communication with content creators, prompting questions, and fostering a deeper understanding of the nuances of sex work. This direct interaction demystifies the profession and provides a candid look into the lived experiences of sex workers, enhancing the educational value of the content and broadening the viewers' perspectives.

Besides sex-work-based educational sexual content, a community of entertainment content related to sex work on TikTok was also present. This dynamic category of sex work content aimed to captivate and engage viewers while shedding light on the creativity and diversity within the sex work community. Creators leveraged the platform's features to showcase their talents through various forms of content, including dance routines, comedy skits, artistic performances, and storytelling that explored themes and experiences related to sex work. These captivating and entertaining videos served multiple purposes within the TikTok ecosystem, specifically targeting both other sex workers and a broader audience. First, it functioned as a means of self-expression, enabling sex work creators to challenge stereotypes, misconceptions, and stigma associated with their profession. Through their engaging and

entertaining performances, creators sought to humanize sex work, emphasizing the creativity, talent, and resilience within the community. This form of content allowed them to reclaim their narratives, showcase their skills, and dismantle societal preconceptions by offering an authentic glimpse into their lives. Second, entertainment content played a vital role in fostering a sense of community and connection. By sharing relatable experiences, humorous anecdotes, and lighthearted performances, sex work creators cultivated a supportive and inclusive environment, where viewers could find solace, entertainment, and a sense of belonging.

The performance aspect of entertainment content within the sex work community on TikTok showcased the unique talents and abilities of sex work creators, tailored to resonate with the platform's audience. Through their videos, creators incorporated elements of acting, comedy, dance, and storytelling to deliver captivating and entertaining performances. By leveraging these community-driven trends and scripts, the study found sex work creators infusing their entertainment content with a dynamic and engaging quality that captivated viewers and fostered a sense of shared culture and identity within the sex work community on TikTok. Using community-specific trending sounds and mimetic scripts and contexts, therefore, added a layer of community-driven participation, as creators reproduced and adapted popular audio snippets to create unique and entertaining performances. Paralleling this, community-driven engagement also played a pivotal role in the success of entertainment content related to sex work on TikTok, where creators within the sex work community used specific strategies to foster interaction and connection. Through humorous skits, relatable narratives, and interactive features like comments, duets, challenges, and collaborations, sex work creators on TikTok actively engaged with their audience, inviting them to take part in the content creation process and share their thoughts. This engagement-driven approach not only fostered a sense of community within the sex work content sphere on TikTok but also facilitated a closer bond between creators and viewers, creating an environment of empowerment, camaraderie, and shared enjoyment.

The final two categorical types of sex-work-based content on TikTok identified for the typology were ‘personal expression content.’ and ‘advocacy content related to sex work.’ These two categories

were deeply connected, as personal expression often served as a form of advocacy in its own right. The coalescence of personal expression and advocacy within this content is rooted in the historical stigmatization, exploitation, and discrimination that sex workers have faced, which has marginalized them and posed challenges to their agency. In the platform context, one manifestation of this is through digital invisibilization practices, including de-ranking, shadow banning, blocking, and deplatforming. These practices operate as mechanisms of suppression, effectively rendering sex workers invisible or limiting their reach and visibility within the platform's algorithmic systems. These practices, perpetuating the silencing and erasure of sex workers' voices, further exacerbates the systemic barriers that they have already faced for centuries.

A strong example of sex workers actively engaging in personal expression and advocacy on TikTok is through vlogging their everyday interactions. Throughout the study, many sex workers and individuals associated with the sex work industry were observed creating and sharing content pieces that provided an intimate and authentic glimpse into the everyday aspects of their lives. These vlogs showcased not only their experiences in the workplace but also the various aspects of their daily routines and personal lives. For instance, sex workers documented their morning routines, sharing how they prepare for the day, their self-care rituals, and their thoughts and feelings before starting work. They also shared moments of downtime, engaging in hobbies, spending time with loved ones, or pursuing personal interests. By sharing these personal moments like these, the performers challenged prevailing stereotypes of sex work and humanized their experiences, breaking down the barriers that often separate the public perception of sex work from the reality of their lives. These vlogs not only provided a platform for sex workers to express themselves authentically but also offered opportunities for viewers to gain insight into the complexities and nuances of their everyday experiences.

Through their active engagement in personal expression and advocacy on platforms such as TikTok, sex workers actively resisted–through their content performances–the digital invisibilization tactics employed against them. Thereby asserting their presence, demanding recognition, and reclaiming agency within the digital space. By creating and sharing content, they challenge the systems that

perpetuate their marginalization, disrupt dominant narratives, and shape the discourse surrounding sex work. Through the sharing of personal stories, experiences, and perspectives, sex workers de-construct and contest imposed narratives and amplify their own voices and perspectives. Their personal expression serves as a potent tool for visibility politics, challenging societal norms and humanizing their experiences. This convergence of personal expression and advocacy underscores the intrinsic link between the personal and the political, as sex workers use their individual experiences to advocate for broader social change and challenge the systemic injustices faced by their community.

Though sex-work-based advocacy and expression content deeply intermingled, in terms of user-generated context, they demonstrated marked distinction in the production, performance, and engagement elements of the content. Advocacy content within the realm of sex work showed a strong emphasis on informative narratives, data-driven presentations, and explicit calls to action. Deeply entwined with sex-work-based educational content, creators sought to educate viewers about the realities and challenges faced by sex workers, debunk misconceptions, and advocate for policy reforms. Besides providing informative narratives, sex-work-based advocacy content presented a call to action or incorporated an additional political element, distinguishing it from other types of educational content. These videos employed statistical data, research findings, and personal testimonies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand. The intention behind advocacy content was to shift audience understanding and mobilize viewers towards specific social and political goals, encouraging them to support initiatives, sign petitions, or engage in activism. By leveraging the persuasive power of storytelling and evidence-based arguments, these creators aimed to drive positive change and improve the labour conditions for sex workers. Through their educational advocacy, they sought to debunk misconceptions, challenge stigmas, and advocate for policy reforms within the sex work industry.

In contrast, expressive content in the context of sex work on TikTok encompassed a wide range of everyday lifestyle content in which sex workers expressed various facets of their lives beyond their profession. This content category was diverse, with actors from different sectors of the sex work industry

using TikTok as a platform to share everyday– and notably non-sexual–aspects of their lives and engage with their audience. For instance, porn stars may share debriefing videos in which they discuss what happens behind the scenes after shooting a video, representatives from sex workers' rights organizations may share a livestream to provide updates on landmark cases and advocate for policy reforms, and glory hole workers may even share a cooking tutorial on making sourdough bread. The variety and scope of everyday expressive lifestyle sex-work-based content on TikTok are vast and impossible to pin down to a specific set of examples, as it encompasses an array of topics and interests.

This type of content challenges the dehumanizing perception often associated with sex work, allowing individuals to share their experiences on TikTok in a way that promotes normalcy, understanding, and empathy. By showcasing their everyday lives and sharing personal stories, the creators of this content humanize the sex work experience and encourage viewers to see them beyond the stereotypes and stigmas. Through personal storytelling, glimpses into their hobbies, or discussions about topics unrelated to their work, sex workers on TikTok reveal their multidimensionality and challenge the preconceived notions and stereotypes often associated with their profession. By humanizing themselves in these expressive and relatable ways, sex workers dismantle the false dichotomy that separates their identities as sex workers from their identities as individuals with diverse interests, passions, and experiences. Over time, the widespread dissemination of this content has the potential to dismantle the alienation often experienced by sex workers, fostering a broader recognition and appreciation of their shared humanity among those who are not directly involved in the industry.

5.4. A Typology of Sexual Content on TikTok and Its Implications for Platform Politics and Governance

While the content categories of sexual education, sexual entertainment, sexual advocacy, personal sexual expression, kink and fetish content, and sex work content often intersect and create complex relationships, they maintain distinct purposes even as contexts collapse. Each category is grounded in specific objectives, addressing different dimensions of human sexuality, for different purposes. The overlaps between these categories arise from the intricate interplay of human experiences, perspectives,

and the fluidity of digital platforms like TikTok. Despite this convergence, the distinctions in purpose remain, serving as guiding principles that underpin the creation and consumption of content. However, these categories, while distinct in their objectives, often intertwine, leading to a convergence of influences that shape the broader landscape of sexual discourse on TikTok. The intricate interplay and overlapping interactions between the diverse sexual content categories within the typology on TikTok highlight the platform's multifaceted nature as well as the complexity of contemporary sexual expression.

The boundaries between sexual education and advocacy-oriented content are particularly fuzzy, as creators skillfully combine the informative power of educational content with the advocacy for sexual diversity and inclusivity. Educational videos frequently serve as vehicles for promoting empathy and understanding, blurring the lines between imparting knowledge, and advocating for societal change. This dynamic underscore the potential of educational content to transcend mere information-sharing, transforming into platforms that stimulate broader conversations about sexual identity, acceptance, and tolerance. In other words, intersection between education and advocacy holds the potential to challenge entrenched norms and bring about shifts in societal perceptions of sexuality.

Similarly, sexual entertainment and personal sexual expression and educational content share overlapping territories, as both categories draw from captivating performances to engage audiences. While sexual entertainment content may prioritize humor, artistry, or sensuality, personal sexual expression can also be inherently entertaining in its authenticity and relatability. This convergence reveals how personal narratives can be woven into entertaining formats, bridging the gap between individual stories and audience engagement. This fusion serves as an example of how genuine self-expression can resonate powerfully with viewers, while also emphasizing that entertainment is not confined to scripted acts but can emanate from the candid sharing of personal experiences.

Moreover, the overlaps extend to the relationship between sexual advocacy and sex work content. While advocating for rights, challenging stigmas, and sharing experiences, sex work content demonstrates the potency of advocacy within a category often subject to marginalization. This intersection illustrates how advocacy, far from being limited to traditional modes of activism, can thrive within digital platforms

like TikTok, creating spaces for dialogue and awareness. Additionally, sex work content's confluence with education also educates viewers about an often-misunderstood industry, contributing to a more informed discourse around sex work and the rights of sex workers.

The implications of these overlaps, and the many more that exist, are significant, reflecting the dynamic nature of sexuality's digital representation. The porous boundaries prompt creators to explore innovative ways of merging content categories, creating content that is not only engaging but also enlightening and transformative. These overlaps encourage nuanced conversations that resist easy categorization, highlighting the multifaceted dimensions of sexual expression. However, the overlaps also introduce challenges, as creators need to navigate complex intersections while ensuring the integrity of the messages they convey. This demands a heightened sense of responsibility to uphold accuracy, sensitivity, and ethics, particularly when addressing issues as delicate as sexuality, identity, and advocacy.

From the perspective of content creators, the challenges posed by these overlaps are multifaceted. While the fusion of categories offers opportunities for creative exploration, it also requires creators to tread carefully. Collapsing contexts may unintentionally blur the lines between educational, advocacy, and entertainment content, potentially leading to confusion among viewers about the intended message. Moreover, the collision of different sexual content categories might inadvertently marginalize some messages or dilute their impact, as their essence becomes entangled in a sea of content. Creators, thus, face the intricate task of maintaining the distinctiveness of their content within the broader context of overlaps, balancing the objectives of each category they engage with.

For platforms and their governance, these overlaps pose a unique challenge. The phenomenon of "sexual context collapse" arises when content that belongs to distinct categories converges in ways that challenge traditional content boundaries. This can complicate content moderation, as automated systems might struggle to discern the multifaceted nature of such content. The collision of sexual content categories can inadvertently lead to the amplification of inappropriate or misleading content, detracting from the intended educational or advocacy purpose. Platforms must evolve their content moderation strategies to understand and address these overlaps more effectively, incorporating human review

processes that can navigate the intricate nuances presented by multifaceted content. Ensuring transparent content policies, providing clear guidelines on the treatment of overlaps, and facilitating open communication with content creators become pivotal in mitigating the challenges and fostering an inclusive and responsible digital space.

Ultimately, the interactions between the various sexual content communities on TikTok reveal a dynamic ecosystem of discourse and representation. As creators navigate these overlaps, they contribute to the platform's role as a space for education, entertainment, advocacy, and self-expression. The multifarious conversations sparked by these overlaps enrich the understanding of sexuality in the digital age, shaping a more inclusive and progressive narrative that encompasses the diverse spectrum of human experiences.

At this point, is crucial to explore the implications of this typology of sexual content on TikTok and its practical applications for future research on sexual content on social media platforms. This typology represents a contribution to the field by providing a framework that advances our understanding of digital sexual expression and its influence on contemporary sexual culture. Through the meticulous delineation of different categories of sexual content and the examination of their distinctive characteristics, content moderation researchers and practitioners can gain insights into the complex and multifaceted nature of sexual content creation, consumption, and community-building on the platform. The typology offers a nuanced lens through which to can analyze and comprehend the diverse landscape of sexual content on TikTok. By categorizing content into specific types such as seductive content, educational content, entertainment content, personal expression content, and advocacy content, researchers can discern the various purposes, identities, and contexts that underpin sexual content creation. This granular understanding enables us to move beyond simplistic and generalized interpretations of sexual content and delve into the intricate dynamics and nuances of its production, engagement, and reception–both inside and out of the particular platform context.

One of the key implications of this typology is its potential to challenge the limitations and gaps present in existing collapsed frameworks and conceptualizations of sexual content. Traditional typologies

often fail to adequately distinguish between different forms of sexual expression, leading to indiscriminate restrictions and prohibitions that stifle the diversity and complexity of sexual discourse. In contrast, this new typology acknowledges and embraces the multifarious nature of sexual content on TikTok, providing a comprehensive framework that recognizes the unique characteristics and intentions of each category. This typology broadens the scope of our analysis of sexual content by deepening our understanding of the intricate social and cultural dynamics that drive the creation of sexual content on TikTok. It highlights the role of community-driven content, particularly in the sex-work and kink and fetish communities, where individuals actively engage in producing content that reflects their experiences, challenges stereotypes, and fosters a sense of solidarity. The typology permits us to examine the performative, production, and engagement elements unique to each category, shedding light on how creators navigate platform constraints and engage with their audiences.

Practically speaking, this typology offers numerous applications for research, policymaking, and practice. In research, it provides a framework for studying the various dimensions of sexual content on TikTok, enabling researchers to investigate the impacts, audience reception, and social dynamics associated with each category. It also offers a basis for comparative studies between platforms, exploring similarities and differences in the creation and consumption of sexual content across digital spaces. From a policy perspective, this typology helps policymakers and content governance stakeholders understand the diversity within sexual content and recognize the need for tailored approaches in content governance. Instead of enforcing broad restrictions or bans, policies can be developed that consider the distinct purposes and contexts of different sexual content categories, fostering a more inclusive, sensible, and human rights-based approach.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations and challenges associated with implementing and applying this typology. The evolving nature of digital platforms and the ever-changing landscape of sexual content present ongoing challenges in categorization and analysis. The typology may require regular updates and refinements to accommodate emerging trends and shifts in content creation practices. Additionally, the subjectivity inherent in categorizing and interpreting sexual content poses a challenge,

as different individuals may have varying perspectives and understandings of what constitutes each category. There is a risk of oversimplification or misinterpretation when assigning content to specific categories, particularly when content creators employ multifaceted approaches or blend elements from different categories.

The typology also faces the challenge of generalizability. TikTok is just one platform within the broader digital landscape, and the dynamics of sexual content creation and reception may vary across different platforms and online spaces. The typology's application may be limited to TikTok or require adaptations for other platforms, which possess their own unique content policies, community norms, and technical affordances. Finally, while the typology contributes to our understanding of sexual content on TikTok, it does not capture the full complexity and diversity of the experiences and perspectives of all sex workers or individuals engaged in sexual expression online. It is essential to recognize the intersectionality and varied contexts in which sexual content is created and consumed, and to engage in ongoing dialogue and research to deepen our understanding of this complex terrain.

In conclusion, the development of this typology provides a framework for understanding the diverse landscape of sexual content on TikTok. By delineating different categories of sexual content and examining their unique characteristics, we gain insights into the multifaceted nature of digital sexual expression. Without a diverse framework to unravel the often-misunderstood sexual content, the challenge of distinction will continue to negatively affect platform governance and content moderation practices. The current failures of content moderation in effectively discerning between different types of sexual context in content perpetuate the risks of misclassification, censorship, and unequal treatment. Designed with an aim to address this challenge, the typological framework can serve as a helpful tool for content creators, researchers, policymakers, moderators, and platform operators to navigate the complexities of sexual content on TikTok and beyond. The typological framework provides insights into sexual contents' various forms, purposes, and impacts. It highlights the interconnections between different content types, communities, and the related platform politics and governance, while also acknowledging the limitations and challenges that arise in categorization and analysis.

This typological framework not only illuminates the rich tapestry of sexual content on TikTok but also underscores the critical need for nuanced content governance and moderation practices that can accurately differentiate and appreciate the diversity of sexual expressions. By providing a structured lens through which to view and understand the spectrum of sexual content, this framework facilitates a more informed, equitable, and sensitive approach to content moderation, one that respects the creators' intent and the community's needs while safeguarding against harmful misrepresentations and censorship. Furthermore, it paves the way for future research to build upon this foundational understanding, encouraging deeper explorations into the socio-cultural implications of sexual content in digital spaces. Ultimately, the establishment of this typology marks a significant step towards fostering a digital environment that is inclusive, diverse, and respectful of the myriad ways sexuality is expressed and experienced online, promoting a balanced discourse that benefits not only the TikTok community but also the broader digital landscape.

Chapter 6: Experiences, Understandings, and Influences of TikTok's Sexual Content Creators

6.1. Platform Politics and Governance and Sexual Content Creators on TikTok

TikTok's moderation of sexual content, when combined with societal norms and biases about sex, often place sexual content creators in a precarious and uncertain environment. In this position, the risks they often face is multifaceted: their content might be subject to de-ranking, significantly diminishing its visibility and reach. This not only impacts their current audience engagement but also has long-term effects on their follower growth and platform presence. More severe consequences could include account suspensions or complete deplatforming, which can abruptly end their means of expression and, for some, a vital source of income. Additionally, the constant ambiguity around content policies fosters a culture of self-censorship among creators, who often feel compelled to dilute the authenticity of their content to adhere to vague and inconsistently applied rules. This cautious approach to content creation not only limits the diversity and richness of sexual narratives on TikTok but also reinforces the platform's power dynamics, dictating the bounds within which creators can express themselves.

Building upon the established research implementation and typology, this chapter probes the complex interactions among platform politics, governance, and the nuances of affective body politics that play out in sexual content creation on TikTok. This analysis aims to offer a multi-faceted understanding of the factors that shape the experiences of sexual content creators on the platform. It thoroughly examines various aspects of the research question, including creators' experiences, their perceptions, and the influences impacting them, through a detailed presentation and analysis of the research findings.

The primary goal of this chapter is to explore the ways sexual content creators on TikTok navigate and often creatively counter the platform's governance mechanisms. This exploration aims to illuminate the multifaceted interplay between user agency in content performance and production, and the broader context of platform politics and governance. By doing so, the chapter seeks to uncover the

nuanced ways in which TikTok's sexual content creators interact with and influence the platform's overarching governance structures.

6.2. Experiences of Sexual Content Creators on TikTok

The findings of this dissertation reveal a detailed landscape of the experiences of sexual content creators on TikTok. This diverse group engaged in a range of content types, encompassing education, advocacy, entertainment, and seductive content, as well as community-centric content within realms such as sex work and kink/fetish communities. A common thread among these creators, irrespective of their content type, was the challenge of navigating TikTok's unpredictable and inconsistent content governance. Many reported experiences of frustration due to the platform's opaque content moderation policies, characterized by seemingly arbitrary content removals and policy violations. Despite these challenges, creators also identified opportunities within this unpredictability. By strategically modifying their content, they found ways to adapt to the shifting landscape of content moderation. This adaptability not only allowed them to sustain their visibility on the platform but also to continue engaging their audience effectively. Moreover, their strategic content adjustments enabled them to explore and push the boundaries of expression while adhering to the platform's evolving guidelines.

A significant finding of this research points to a notable contradiction on TikTok: the platform's diverse range of sexual content types is at odds with the uniform challenges creators face in content governance. Despite the varying nature of their work, which spans from educational materials to explicit content within sex work and kink communities, all interviewed creators encountered the pervasive issue of sexual context collapse. This issue was consistently observed and verified through video content analysis. This phenomenon, characterized by the indiscriminate grouping of varied and nuanced sexual narratives under restrictive content policies, posed a widespread challenge. Creators often saw their content misinterpreted and subjected to the same stringent moderation as overtly sexual material, irrespective of its educational, advocacy, or community-oriented purpose. Such a uniform approach to content moderation not only impeded their effective communication within their intended sexual context

but also fueled broader misconceptions and stigmatization of sexual content on the platform. Thus, this study underscores the urgent need for more refined, context-aware content moderation practices on TikTok, ones that can genuinely accommodate the platform's broad spectrum of sexual expression.

In some ways, the unpredictability of the content moderation process on TikTok became a catalyst for innovation and creativity among creators, as they sought to stay relevant and maintain their presence on the platform. This dynamic can be understood through the lens of the Sexual Context Collapse Framework. Creators often engaged in colluding sexual contexts, blending their sexual content with mainstream elements to circumvent platform restrictions while still conveying their intended messages. This strategic adaptation allowed them to navigate the challenges of collapsed sexual contexts, where their varied and nuanced expressions were otherwise at risk of being misunderstood or unfairly censored under TikTok's broad content policies. Additionally, they had to constantly negotiate colliding sexual contexts, balancing the diverse expectations of their audience with the platform’s moderation norms. In essence, the need to creatively adapt to TikTok's unpredictable content governance led these creators to explore and exploit the entire spectrum of sexual contexts, from condensed to colluding, thereby maintaining their digital presence, and engaging with their audience in innovative ways.

Empirical evidence from the interviews supports the notion that TikTok's content moderation process drives creators to innovative and strategic content production. For instance, an online exhibitionist and sexual lifestyle blogger described the delicate balancing act required to be a successful creator of sexually suggestive content on TikTok. They noted the necessity of content being "mild enough to meet community guidelines, but wild enough to appeal to the audience," highlighting the fine line between compliance and popularity. Interestingly, they observed that edgier content, while riskier, often gains more traction and is less likely to be taken down once it goes viral. This paradoxical situation forces creators to constantly experiment and adapt their content to both engage their audience and navigate the platform’s ambiguous guidelines.

Similarly, a sex researcher pointed out the inconsistencies in TikTok's content moderation, where anatomical education might be flagged as explicit while more overtly sexualized content is not. This

inconsistency in the algorithm's interpretation demonstrates the challenges creators face in predicting how their content will be received by the platform. The researcher also highlighted the underlying dynamics of social media, where the politics of withholding content plays a crucial role in engaging audiences, suggesting an intentional strategy by creators to navigate these limitations.

Further, many creators overwhelmingly expressed frustration with the platform's opaque moderation processes. A sex toy reviewer and educator, for instance, shared their experience of having content removed without a clear explanation, underscoring the lack of transparency and specific feedback from TikTok. They explicitly stated, like several other creators, that the uncertainty creates a challenging environment for creators who invest significant time and effort into building their presence on the platform. Similarly, a BDSM/fetish and amateur porn performer echoed these sentiments, noting the arbitrary nature of content removals, with no clear rationale provided by TikTok. This lack of clarity and consistency in content moderation leaves creators in a state of confusion and frustration, compelling them to continuously adapt their strategies to maintain their visibility and audience engagement on the platform.

The empirical evidence gathered from these interviews' maps directly onto the sexual context collapse framework and the spectrum of sexual content on TikTok, illustrating the intricate relationship between the platform's politics and governance and the diverse range of sexual content. The creators' experiences of navigating content moderation policies reflect a constant struggle against the forces of collapsed sexual context, where diverse sexual narratives are often indiscriminately restricted under a blanket policy. This results in a challenging landscape where the nuances of colliding sexual contexts—such as the clash between educational and explicit content—are frequently overlooked. Simultaneously, creators employ tactics of colluding sexual context, subtly blending sexual content with more broadly accepted elements to circumvent restrictions. This strategic approach is a direct response to the platform's governance, illustrating how creators must continually adapt within a condensed sexual context spectrum, from explicit to more subtle expressions, to maintain their presence and engage their audience effectively. Thus, the governance and politics of TikTok not only influence but actively shape the sexual content

landscape, compelling creators to navigate a complex web of visibility, moderation, and audience engagement within this dynamic digital environment.

The findings of this study emphasise a prevalent sentiment among TikTok creators: a belief in the platform's selective approach to content governance, particularly concerning content removal or restriction. Many creators feel that TikTok's content removal practices lack consistency, suggesting decisions may be more influenced by the platform's own interests than by a uniform application of its community guidelines. This inconsistency is particularly evident in how different points on the sexual content spectrum are moderated, with condensed sexual contexts often facing stricter scrutiny compared to more subtle, colluding contexts.

Creators perceive an asymmetry in content distribution and moderation enforcement, exacerbating concerns about the impartiality and transparency of TikTok's moderation strategies. This ties back to the notions of collapsed and colliding sexual contexts, where creators' nuanced intentions often clash with the platform's rigid governance structures. Such a dynamic erodes trust in TikTok's regulatory mechanisms, as creators navigate an environment where the rules seem malleable and subject to undisclosed biases. A creator specializing in ‘Sexual ASMR’ and para-social sexual relationships succinctly expressed this sentiment during interviews: “I think the biggest issue is that it’s inconsistent and confusing, and there seems to be no rhyme or reason.” This statement underscores the challenges creators face in aligning their content with TikTok's seemingly unpredictable governance practices, further emphasizing the need for a more nuanced and transparent approach to content moderation on the platform.

Faced with perceived inconsistencies in TikTok's content moderation enforcement, during interviews, a group of creators disclosed that they adopted self-censorship and strategic disengagement from the platform as a defense mechanism. This was a proactive step to avoid unintentionally breaching TikTok's policies and facing potential deplatforming. The interviews revealed the cautious and deliberate nature of this approach, as creators articulated their concerns and outlined their strategies for managing the complex terrain of platform politics and governance within the framework of sexual context collapse.

These insights underscore a conscious shift by creators towards self-censorship to adeptly maneuver through the platform's landscape.

By carefully curating topics, language, and visuals, they sought to strike a balance between creative expression and adherence to TikTok's guidelines, thereby reducing the likelihood of content removal or account suspension. Throughout the study, this approach manifested in various forms, such as creative content adaptations; tailored posting strategies; private or restricted communications; community moderation with appointed user-moderators; and the establishment of alternate accounts. Creators often meticulously crafted their content to align with TikTok’s community standards and guidelines, avoiding explicit sexual terms, imagery, or sensitive subjects prone to flagging by algorithms or community reporting. Some strategically modified their posting schedules or content frequency to reduce their visibility or removed posts that attracted negative attention or violation notices. They also established and moderated their community spaces, setting rules and norms to safeguard against trolling and harassment, and to foster respectful interactions among community members. In cases where creators faced shadowbanning or permanent bans, or anticipated such risks, the creation of backup accounts was a common proactive or reactive strategy.

In addition to these measures, creators employed many other self-censorship strategies and strategic disengagements to navigate the complexities of TikTok's content moderation landscape. One notable tactic previously mentioned was the utilization of ambiguous or coded language and imagery, which allowed them to communicate their message while skirting the boundaries of TikTok's guidelines. This subtle art of insinuation became a vital skill, enabling creators to express themselves without overtly violating the platform's norms. Another strategy involved cross-platformization--diversifying their digital presence across multiple social media platforms. By doing so, creators not only mitigated the risk associated with TikTok's unpredictable moderation policies but also expanded their reach and audience engagement. This multi-platform approach allowed them to redirect followers to less restrictive environments where they could express themselves more freely, thus maintaining their audience base even in the face of potential TikTok restrictions. In this vein, engagement with followers also became

more strategic, with creators often using direct messages or closed groups to share content that might be too risky for public feeds. This shift towards more private modes of communication allowed for deeper and more authentic engagement with dedicated followers, away from the prying eyes of content moderators.

These strategies employed by creators on TikTok reveal a profound understanding of, and response to, the platform's nuanced content governance landscape. Creators are not merely adapting to restrictions; they are actively engaging in a complex dance of visibility and concealment, navigating the blurred lines between collapsed, colliding, and condensed sexual contexts. For instance, in collapsed contexts, where TikTok's broad policies merge diverse sexual narratives, creators have developed sophisticated means to communicate their messages. The use of coded language and imagery isn't just a workaround; it's a nuanced language in itself, born out of necessity, enabling creators to express themselves while ostensibly adhering to the platform's guidelines. This approach is not simply about avoiding detection; it's a creative response to a restrictive digital environment, a form of digital linguistic innovation that speaks volumes about the creators' resilience and adaptability.

In the realm of colliding contexts, the empirical evidence suggests that creators' strategies extend beyond mere adaptation; they signify a proactive redefinition of their digital identity. The choice to diversify across multiple platforms is not solely a defensive move against TikTok's unpredictable moderation. It's a strategic expansion into a broader digital territory. For instance, creators often use platforms like Instagram or Twitter, where the content policies differ, to continue narratives that began on TikTok. This approach is emblematic of a deeper digital fluency, where creators understand the unique affordances of each platform and use them to construct a more holistic and uninterrupted narrative. By doing so, they are not only sidestepping potential clashes with TikTok's regulations but are also crafting a more resilient and diversified digital presence. This tactic indicates a nuanced understanding of the digital media landscape and underscores creators' ability to seamlessly navigate and integrate different digital spaces to maintain a consistent and unimpeded flow of expression.

In condensed contexts, where the risk of censorship is highest, creators' strategies exhibit a remarkable blend of creativity and tactical awareness. Their approach in these contexts is far from a simple exercise in compliance. Instead, they engage in a delicate balancing act, subtly infusing their content with explicit themes while staying within the bounds of TikTok's content policies. For example, creators might employ metaphors, artistic visuals, or suggestive language that hint at explicit themes without directly depicting them, thereby evading censorship. This not only requires an intimate understanding of the platform's moderation algorithms but also a creative ingenuity to convey their message effectively within these constraints. Such strategies highlight creators' ability to navigate the fine line between explicit expression and platform acceptability. It's a skillful negotiation of TikTok's content boundaries, demonstrating an intricate understanding of how to communicate explicit themes in a platform-appropriate manner. This ability is not just a reaction to censorship; it's a sophisticated form of content creation that plays with the nuances of visibility, expression, and platform guidelines, reflecting a deep empirical knowledge of the platform's content spectrum and its inherent challenges.

These strategies paint a picture of TikTok creators as highly adept digital navigators. Their approach to content creation and distribution is not merely reactionary but is marked by a deep empirical understanding of the platform's governance system. They are not just adapting to the digital environment but are actively reshaping the boundaries of sexual content creation and engagement on TikTok, showcasing remarkable resilience and ingenuity in the face of a continuously evolving platform ecosystem. For instance, the study's findings also reveal that self-censorship and strategic disengagement by sexual content creators on TikTok were not merely reactions to platform moderation policies. These actions were intertwined with a deeper desire to protect various aspects of their personal and professional lives. Many creators, for instance, made conscious efforts to keep their professional personas, like their day jobs or roles among colleagues, separate from their TikTok content. Others were mindful of personal identification to safeguard themselves and their families from scrutiny or harassment. This deliberate separation, aimed at preventing 'context collapse,' was crucial in avoiding the overlap of personal, professional, and creative spheres, which could lead to uncomfortable or harmful outcomes (Duguay,

2020). Such strategies align with the concepts of collapsed and colluding sexual contexts, as creators navigate maintaining distinct identities while managing the potential for these spheres to intersect inadvertently.

The study's findings illuminate how TikTok's unique structural features compound the challenges creators face in managing their online personas and controlling who sees their content. TikTok's algorithm, known for its ability to rapidly amplify content, plays a key role in this complexity. Unlike platforms where content reach is primarily determined by followers, TikTok's algorithm can propel videos into a wide array of users' feeds, including those outside the creator's immediate network. This means that a creator's content, regardless of its intended audience, can potentially be seen by anyone on the platform, including individuals like coworkers or family members, whom the creator may wish to keep separate from their online persona.

Adding to this, TikTok's features like video sharing and duetting further expand the reach of content in ways that are often beyond the creator's control. When a user shares or duets with a creator's video, it not only appears in the feeds of that user's followers but can also be boosted by the algorithm, thus multiplying the video's exposure exponentially. This feature, while beneficial for increasing engagement and reach, also means that content can rapidly travel outside the creator's intended audience and context, leading to potential misinterpretations or unintended personal exposure. Moreover, TikTok's structure, which heavily favors viral trends, adds another layer of unpredictability. Content that aligns with or responds to trending topics, hashtags, or sounds can gain rapid and widespread visibility. While this can be advantageous for creators seeking a broader audience, it also poses the risk of their content being viewed by unintended audiences, as these trends often transcend niche communities and become visible platform wide.

This scenario creates a precarious environment for creators who wish to manage distinct online personas. Despite their strategic efforts to curate content for specific audiences, TikTok's algorithmic system and feature set can disrupt these intentions, blurring the lines between different facets of their lives. The challenge lies not only in content creation but also in navigating the platform's inherent

unpredictability, where viral dynamics and extensive content sharing can lead to unintended and sometimes unwelcome exposure of their personal identities.

In addressing these challenges, creators often find themselves compelled to tactically disengage from TikTok, adjusting their content and interactions to mitigate risks such as deplatforming, online harassment, or physical violence. These measures go beyond mere platform compliance; they are essential for personal safety in a digital environment that can be both restrictive and punitive. For instance, one sex work content creator/streamer emphasized the importance of anonymity not just as a professional necessity but as a safety measure against stalking or harassment, while a pole sport and dancing content creator highlighted the use of pseudonyms as a protective barrier against unsolicited attention:

> *"My name is obviously not @[redacted], but that's just Internet law. You know? We're all, regardless of our profession or level of visibility, trying to remain somewhat anonymous on the Internet because people are scary in general and that's not just about being a sex worker, that's about being a woman on the Internet… I don't want random people to show up at my door. I don't want a stalker. I've had people try to dox me before; and that was before I was a sex worker. So, I definitely keep things as private as I possibly can… I'm not trying to hide that I'm a sex worker. I never try to hide it. I think it's very common knowledge for most of my followers that this is what I do….It's more about making sure I don't get murdered by a psychopath, you know?" (Sex Work Content Creator/ "Lewd" Streamer)*

> *"Yeah, I don't hide the fact that I use a pseudonym instead of my real name on social media, including my life art modelling accounts. This is solely to protect myself from stalkers, creeps, and other unwanted attention that I've had to deal with in the past. Having a stage name is a good idea, especially since I receive a lot of messages daily, some of which include unsolicited pictures and videos. Although my content is not necessarily sexual, it can be interpreted that way by some people, so it's important for any content creator to take steps to protect themselves, such as not sharing their location or real name. These precautions should be standard for anyone with similar content on social media." (Pole Sport and Dancing Content Creator)*

These cautions demonstrate, many sexual content creators find themselves walking a fine line, striving to balance not only their creative expression against platform guidelines and cultural norms but also their own personal safety. Overall, these findings paint a picture of sexual content creators on TikTok as navigating a complex, often precarious landscape. They must constantly balance their creative expression against the platform's guidelines and societal norms, while also prioritizing their safety in an environment

where digital exposure can translate into real-world risks. This delicate balancing act is a testament to their resilience and adaptability in the face of multiple, intersecting challenges.

Another important finding that must be highlighted is the socio-economic implications of deplatforming and sexual context collapse for sexual content creators on TikTok, which are both profound and far-reaching. Deplatforming, which ranges from subtler forms like 'shadow banning' to outright permanent bans, drastically affects creators' online presence and livelihood. In the middle of this spectrum are various moderation actions that can severely limit content distribution, visibility, and audience engagement. The impact of these actions is not merely digital but extends into the real socio-economic sphere of the creators. For instance, some creators recounted experiences of temporary or permanent deplatforming that had tangible consequences. One creator shared, “I lost thousands of followers overnight. It was like starting from zero again.” This loss significantly impacted their follower count and reach, directly affecting their visibility and ability to engage with their audience. Moreover, being removed from TikTok’s creator fund meant a cessation of direct compensation from the platform, directly affecting their financial stability. Another creator expressed, “The hardest part was rebuilding my presence. It felt like an uphill battle to regain what I lost, both in followers and in terms of creative expression.”

The socio-economic impact of deplatforming for sexual content creators on platforms like TikTok is multi-dimensional and profound. When creators are deplatformed, they not only lose their immediate audience but also face significant setbacks in their long-term growth and engagement strategies. This loss directly translates into decreased opportunities for brand partnerships, sponsorships, and other monetization avenues that are critical for their financial sustainability. For many creators, especially those who rely on TikTok as their primary source of income, this can mean a sudden and drastic reduction in their earnings. Furthermore, deplatforming often erases the creators' digital history, including their content and follower interactions, which are integral to building a digital brand. Rebuilding this presence is not just a matter of regaining followers but involves re-establishing trust and rapport with an audience, which can be a time-consuming and uncertain process. The loss of content also means a loss of a portfolio

that creators could use to showcase their work to potential collaborators or sponsors, further impeding their economic opportunities.

Additionally, the threat and occurrence of deplatforming create an environment of uncertainty and instability. This constant unpredictability can deter creators from investing in long-term strategies or taking creative risks, ultimately stifling innovation and growth. It can also lead to psychological stress, impacting their overall well-being and productivity. In essence, deplatforming affects more than just the immediate visibility of sexual content creators. It challenges their entire business model, undermines their economic stability, and can have lasting effects on their professional trajectory. This highlights the precariousness of building a career on digital platforms, particularly in the realm of sexual content creation, where misconceptions and biases can disproportionately influence content moderation decisions.

Expanding on this finding, the study emphasizes how the uncertainty and frustration arising from deplatforming were not only internalized by sexual content creators on TikTok but also manifested in their content. Many creators utilized their performances as a medium to challenge the platform's professed commitment to diversity. For instance, some posted videos critiquing TikTok's inconsistent content moderation, using side-by-side comparisons to highlight how their content was flagged as inappropriate, while similar or more explicit content was overlooked. Others utilized meta-data, such as hashtags like #shadowbanned or #censored, to draw attention to these issues and galvanize their followers in a collective response against perceived injustices. A particularly popular response was seen in creators posting “last video” messages, signaling their departure from TikTok and directing followers to alternative platforms, a symbolic act of protest against the platform's moderation practices.

The study revealed that narratives of marginalization and discrimination were a common thread in content about the experiences of sexual content creators on TikTok. These creators, through their performance, often reported feeling targeted by the platform's algorithmic content moderation. Empirical evidence from their accounts pointed to instances where their content was removed or their profiles banned, actions they viewed as unjust and reflective of a system biased against certain types of sexual expression. For example, one creator recounted, “I posted a video that was no different from what you’d

see in mainstream media, yet it was taken down within hours for being ‘too explicit’, while similar videos with more views stayed up.” Such experiences underscored a sense of selective enforcement that appeared to disproportionately affect sexual content creators. Additionally, many creators believed that their content and profiles were subject to systematic de-ranking, a process that reduced their visibility on the platform. This perception was often based on their observation of fluctuating engagement rates and follower growth, seemingly unrelated to content quality or viewer interest. As one creator explained, “My content used to get thousands of views consistently, but suddenly, it's like I don’t exist on the platform anymore.”

Faced with these challenges, creators did not remain passive. Many engaged in active resistance and appeals against what they perceived as unfair deplatforming. This resistance took various forms, from formally appealing TikTok’s decisions to using their content as a platform for advocacy. “I started creating videos to raise awareness about how TikTok moderates sexual content,” shared one creator, illustrating how some turned their personal experiences into broader discussions about content moderation on the platform. These actions highlight the creators' determination to reclaim some degree of control and agency within TikTok’s ecosystem. Despite feeling marginalized and often powerless in the face of TikTok's opaque content governance, they sought ways to push back against the system, aiming to reshape the narrative around sexual content and its place on the platform. This resilience and activism demonstrate the creators' commitment not only to their personal expression but also to a broader cause of advocating for fairer and more transparent content moderation practices.

Importantly, the marginalization experienced by sexual content creators on TikTok was notably amplified by interactions not only with the platform's algorithms but also with its user community. Numerous creators reported facing coordinated harassment campaigns, where groups of users systematically flagged, brigaded, and reported their content. This form of collective action often led to heightened scrutiny from TikTok's moderation system, reinforcing the creators' sense of being targeted. Empirical evidence from the creators' experiences paints a vivid picture of this challenge. One creator described regular encounters with organized flagging: “It’s like a wave hits your profile. Suddenly,

there’s a surge in reports and negative comments, clearly orchestrated.” Another creator shared, “My content which was well within community guidelines got mass-reported, leading to a temporary ban. It felt like a targeted attack.” Such coordinated user actions not only intensified the moderation scrutiny but also contributed to a pervasive sense of exclusion and stigmatization within the TikTok community. Creators felt ostracized, not just by the platform's algorithms, but by segments of its user base. This stigmatization extended beyond the digital sphere, affecting creators' mental well-being and sense of belonging. “It's not just about losing visibility,” one creator mentioned, “it's about feeling unwelcome in a space that's supposed to be for everyone.”

This dual-fronted marginalization, stemming from both algorithmic biases and community-driven harassment, underscores the multifaceted obstacles sexual content creators face on TikTok. Not only must they navigate a platform where the system might inherently limit their expression, but they also contend with active suppression efforts from certain user groups. This complex dynamic challenge their ability to maintain a presence and voice on the platform, significantly impacting their ability to connect with audiences and diminishing their opportunities for visibility and engagement. The combination of these algorithmic and community-driven factors illustrates the layered nature of the challenges faced by sexual content creators in digital spaces, where they must constantly balance creative expression with navigating an often-hostile environment.

The study's further exploration into why many sexual content creators persist with TikTok, despite their frustrations and challenges, reveals a nuanced understanding of the platform's role in their broader social media strategy. It was found that creators view TikTok as an indispensable tool for driving traffic to other platforms and increasing their visibility within the social media ecosystem. Despite their grievances with TikTok's content governance and perceived unfair treatment, they recognize the unique opportunities the platform offers for expanding their reach and enhancing their online presence. This paradox between the benefits and drawbacks of platformization and deplatformization illustrates the heavy reliance of creators on TikTok, highlighting the significant influence of the platform in shaping the visibility and success of its content creators. Their willingness to navigate the complexities of content

moderation underscores the compelling allure and potential benefits that TikTok offers in terms of audience engagement and exposure.

Several creators expressed this sentiment during the research interviews: “The problems with TikTok are almost not even worth mentioning because of the amount of organic reach and opportunity TikTok provides. I would not be where I am without TikTok. 99.9% of my subscribers come from TikTok. I made a lot of money from TikTok, so it does seem ridiculous to complain.” This quote highlights the significant benefits and opportunities that TikTok provides, making the challenges seem minor in comparison.

Another creator, a sex worker and “lewd” streamer, emphasized the stark contrast in discoverability between TikTok and other platforms: “Discoverability on other platforms is abysmal. On TikTok, I have over 120,000 followers. It sucks but it's still better discoverability than trying to take my social media presence elsewhere. So, I’ll continue to fight the uphill battle because I don’t really have any other choice right now.” This perspective underlines the importance of TikTok in the creator's strategy for visibility and audience growth, despite the ongoing struggles with the platform's moderation policies.

These insights into the creators' experiences on TikTok indeed highlight a complex, co-dependent relationship between them and the platform. While grappling with content moderation challenges, creators still recognize the substantial benefits TikTok offers, like reaching new audiences, enhancing their brand, and cross-platform promotion. This pragmatic approach underlines how creators adeptly navigate and adapt to TikTok's challenges, strategically using the platform’s influence to boost their visibility and success. This adaptation is not just a matter of compliance but a sophisticated strategy to optimize the opportunities TikTok presents, despite its inherent limitations and challenges. However, this heavy reliance on TikTok as a central platform for their digital presence and economic success raises significant concerns about the concentration of power and control in the hands of platform operators. Creators find themselves in a vulnerable position, heavily dependent on TikTok for audience reach and visibility, which in turn subjects them to the platform’s fluctuating policies and decisions. The creators’

experiences of inconsistent and sometimes arbitrary content moderation underscore a sense of marginalization and stigmatization, reinforcing their feeling of being at the mercy of the platform's rules.

This dependence on TikTok also impacts the diversity and plurality of content distribution. Creators are often compelled to tailor their content to align with TikTok's algorithmic preferences and trending topics to maximize their visibility and success. Such a scenario limits the range of creative expression, pushing creators to conform to a narrow set of guidelines and trends dictated by the platform. The platform's dominance in the social media landscape, therefore, poses critical questions about the long-term implications of such centralized control. It raises concerns about the potential stifling of creative freedom and the homogenization of content, as creators may increasingly find themselves conforming to a monolithic set of standards to maintain their online presence and livelihood. Thus, while TikTok offers significant opportunities for audience engagement and professional growth, it also presents a paradox where creators must continuously balance their creative expression with the platform's overarching governance and algorithmic dictates. This dynamic reflects a broader trend in the digital content creation landscape, where platform dependency can both empower and limit creators, shaping the future of digital expression and creativity.

Concluding this section, it should be evident by now that the journey of sexual content creators on TikTok is marked by a complex interplay of challenges and opportunities. The empirical findings from this study not only illuminate the struggles and frustrations these creators face with TikTok's unpredictable content moderation but also reveal their resilience and ingenuity in navigating these challenges. The creators' experiences, encapsulated through the lens of the Sexual Context Collapse Framework, demonstrate a nuanced understanding of TikTok's content governance landscape. They adeptly maneuver through collapsed, colliding, and condensed contexts, employing strategies like coded language, cross-platformization, and strategic content adaptation to sustain their presence on the platform. However, these strategies also underscore a troubling dependence on TikTok, revealing a precarious balance of power between the creators and the platform. This reliance places creators in a vulnerable position, subject to the whims of TikTok's moderation policies and the often-unpredictable dynamics of

user interaction. The creators' narratives of marginalization and discrimination, whether due to algorithmic biases or community-driven harassment, paint a picture of a digital environment fraught with challenges to their creative expression, personal safety, and professional growth.

Despite these obstacles, creators continue to leverage TikTok's potential for significant audience reach and visibility, illustrating the platform's unique role in their digital ecosystem. This co-dependent relationship, while beneficial in terms of exposure and audience engagement, raises critical questions about the long-term sustainability of such a model. It highlights the need for a more equitable and transparent content governance system that recognizes the diverse spectrum of sexual content and respects the creative agency of content creators. Thus, the experiences of sexual content creators on TikTok provide valuable insights into the complexities of digital content creation in a rapidly evolving social media landscape. Their stories are emblematic of the broader challenges faced by content creators in an age where platform algorithms and user dynamics significantly influence visibility and success. This study, therefore, not only contributes to our understanding of content creation dynamics on digital platforms but also underscores the urgency for more nuanced and creator-centric approaches to content moderation and platform governance.

6.3. Understandings: Perceptions and Interpretations

This section of the study’s findings extends its focus to examine how exactly sexual content creators perceive and interpret TikTok's platform politics and governance. It digs into their understanding of the policies, guidelines, and practices that govern content visibility on the platform. Central to this is an exploration of the creators' insights into the intricacies of content moderation, including algorithmic decision-making, criteria for content removal, and the appeals process. Additionally, the study scrutinized creators' perspectives on the transparency and consistency of TikTok's policy enforcement, evaluating how these perceptions shape their content creation strategies and overall experiences on the platform. By probing into these aspects, the study seeks to capture a comprehensive view of how creators navigate and respond to the multifaceted challenges presented by TikTok's content moderation framework.

Creators on TikTok frequently contended with a pervasive uncertainty surrounding the platform's content management rules and practices. This ambiguity often translated into frustration as they endeavored to decipher the platform's moderation policies. Navigating the complicated landscape of TikTok's content governance, creators found themselves confronting the challenge of demarcating the boundaries of acceptable content. They observed a disconcerting inconsistency between the type of content that was ostensibly permitted by the platform's guidelines and the content that actually gained traction. This lack of clarity around TikTok's content moderation protocols led creators to develop their own interpretations or 'folk theories' about how content distribution and moderation systems operated on the platform. These theories were formulated as part of their strategies to navigate TikTok's unpredictable content governance landscape, a key aspect of the Sexual Context Collapse Framework. Within this framework, creators tried to make sense of the collapsed, colliding, and condensed sexual contexts, each presenting unique challenges in understanding the platform's moderation logic.

For instance, in collapsed contexts on TikTok, where the platform's moderation practices often blurred the lines between different types of sexual content, creators frequently found themselves in a state of speculation regarding the platform's content removal or suppression criteria. This uncertainty was not without empirical evidence; several creators recounted instances where their content, which seemed to align with other publicly available and non-flagged material, was inexplicably removed or suppressed. For example, a creator focusing on sexual health education stated, "I posted an educational video about consent, similar in tone and content to others on the platform, yet mine was taken down for being 'inappropriate'. It left me questioning what exactly triggered this." Such experiences led creators to formulate theories about hidden guidelines or unstated thresholds that could potentially lead to content suppression.

In colliding contexts, creators hypothesized about how TikTok managed the balance between divergent audience expectations and content norms. This was particularly evident in the case of creators producing content that straddled the line between education and explicitness. As one creator noted, "It feels like a gamble – what one person finds educational, another might flag as explicit. We're left

guessing how TikTok navigates these conflicting views." This uncertainty compelled creators to constantly adjust their content, trying to find a middle ground that would satisfy TikTok's ambiguous moderation criteria without alienating their audience.

In condensed contexts, where explicit content faced the most intense scrutiny, creators had to infer what TikTok considered acceptable. The thresholds for what constituted 'too explicit' were often nebulous, leading to a trial-and-error approach. A creator who produced content around body positivity and sexual confidence shared, "I've had to tone down my content, even though it's meant to be empowering. It seems there's an invisible line you can't cross, but no one tells you where it is." This quote reflects the challenges faced by creators in navigating the platform's stringent, yet often unclear, policies on explicit content.

These observations and experiences highlight the complexities and nuances of TikTok's content moderation landscape. Creators, in their attempt to understand and adapt to this landscape, developed a range of hypotheses and strategies to continue their engagement on the platform. These self-formulated theories and interpretations were not just speculative exercises; they were integral to creators' adaptive strategies. By developing an individualized understanding of TikTok's opaque system, creators attempt to mitigate the risks of deplatforming while striving to maintain their visibility and audience engagement.

Amidst the ambiguity of TikTok's content moderation policies, sexual content creators have demonstrated an acute awareness of their agency within the platform. They recognize the potential to contest and strategically navigate the complexities of invisibility and deplatforming through their content. A common approach among these creators has been to craft content that scrutinizes or challenges the limits of TikTok's content distribution and moderation. By pushing these boundaries or openly questioning them through their content creation, these individuals actively probe the extent of acceptability within the platform's guidelines. One sex worker and Only Fans performer articulated this balancing act: "There is a fine line, it seems, between what will get me flagged and what will get me views. I'm always trying to balance that line. It's incredibly difficult though. The stuff where I'm thirst-trapping is the stuff that does well. So, I kind of stick to that content now because it's pretty much all that

gets views. However, I am currently shadow banned on the platform.” This quote underscores the paradoxical nature of content creation on TikTok, where adherence to moderation guidelines must be weighed against the desire for high engagement and visibility. The creator's experience reflects a strategic, albeit challenging, approach to content creation that maximizes viewership while navigating the platform's content policies.

Another creator, specializing in BDSM and fetish content, shared their experiences with the platform's inconsistent policy enforcement: “Usually the sounds are quite permitted. Jumping and jiggling is permitted as well. Touching the breast area is not permitted... You can have fleshlights and [kink] collars, but you cannot have handcuffs. And restraints will not go very well... I have a collection of whips and my collars and ball gags on the door. I’ve played with a ball gag and even a butt plug sometimes on the video, and that's been fine too. But, if I had had a dildo that is naturally shaped like a penis, that would be a big issue unless I flash it extremely, extremely fast." This creator's insights highlight the nuanced and often perplexing nature of TikTok's content moderation, which necessitates a careful and informed approach to content creation within the platform's ambiguous boundaries.

The exploration into sexual content creators' understanding of their agency on TikTok reveals an interesting dynamic in how they perceive the platform's control mechanisms. Creators frequently employed the metaphorical concept of the "TikTok Gods" to describe the platform's automated moderation and algorithmic deplatforming decisions. This mythical terminology encapsulates their view of TikTok's content moderation as both enigmatic and unpredictable, symbolizing the inscrutability of the platform's algorithmic curation and moderation processes. The metaphor of "TikTok Gods" aptly reflects the complexities creators face in attempting to decode TikTok's elusive content policies. It conjures an image of whimsical deities making inscrutable decisions, effectively portraying the creators' struggles to foresee or comprehend the platform's regulatory mechanisms.

One body positivity, sex-positive, and LGBTQ+ lifestyle creator expressed this sentiment: “In the past, I was much more risqué and would like to push the envelope a lot more. But, I've learned that it pisses off the TikTok gods, and they will heavily moderate your content. So, I don’t do that anymore.”

This statement exemplifies the perceived need to appease these unseen forces to avoid punitive action from the platform. Similarly, a sex worker and “lewd” streamer reflected on this dynamic, saying, “It’s just a back and forth constantly with TikTok trying to appease the TikTok gods so that they will keep pushing your stuff on the algorithm. But that’s not just a sex work problem, that’s a TikTok problem.” This perspective underscores a broader issue across the platform, where all creators grapple with understanding and adapting to the whims of the algorithm. A creator specializing in Sexual ASMR and para-social sexual relationships added, “The TikTok gods have their own rules that creators must follow if they want to succeed on the platform. Even the slightest deviation from these rules can result in heavy moderation or being banished to what I liked to call the algorithmic underworld, where you’ll be forever shadowbanned.” This metaphorically rich description illustrates the perceived high stakes of navigating TikTok's content guidelines.

Importantly, it seemed this metaphorical framing shifts responsibility from TikTok as a tangible corporate entity to an abstract, seemingly detached force. This narrative device denotes an asymmetrical power dynamic, subtly emphasizing the imbalance between individual content creators and the platform operators who exercise ultimate control over content visibility and success. The dichotomy between TikTok as a user-centric service and as a powerful corporate entity is also encapsulated in the creators' choice of language. Employing this rhetorical device provides deep insights into the creators' perspectives on their relationship with the platform, blending a sense of reverence with a critique of the power dynamics at play. While the deference to an abstract "higher power" allows creators to operate within the platform's confines and maintain a sense of autonomy, it also underscores a feeling of disempowerment and uncertainty, reflecting the inherent tensions in the relationship between content creators and TikTok's somewhat opaque governing structures.

Sexual content creators' perceptions of TikTok's platform governance are not solely shaped by the platform's content distribution and moderation systems or their metaphorical framing of these forces. Instead, our study reveals a complex interplay between digital and traditional cultural contexts that inform

their understanding of content moderation. Specifically, creators' comprehension of content moderation emerges from a convergence of both digital and traditional cultural contexts.

One significant influence on creators' perceptions is their understanding of content regulation in legacy media systems, such as television and film. Creators draw on their knowledge and experiences from these traditional media platforms to inform their expectations and interpretations of TikTok's content moderation policies. This connection to legacy media provides creators with a reference point, allowing them to navigate the novel challenges presented by TikTok's content governance. As one creator noted, "Bikinis are bikinis, are bikinis. If a girl jumps on a trampoline in a bikini in the 1990s, nobody cares. So, a girl wearing a cow bikini on TikTok in 2020 shouldn't be jarring to anyone." This perspective reflects the creators' tendency to draw parallels between TikTok and established norms in traditional media.

Furthermore, societal norms surrounding nudity and sexuality in everyday life play a pivotal role in shaping creators' perceptions of appropriate levels of visibility and permissibility on TikTok. These unspoken yet pervasive norms provide a backdrop against which creators frame their understanding of the acceptance and appropriateness of their content on the platform. For instance, a sexual health practitioner and advocate mentioned, "As far as my content goes, I try to keep it PG-13." This demonstrates how societal norms around modesty and public expression of sexuality impact creators' decisions about the content they produce and share.

This nuanced interplay between digital and traditional cultural contexts in shaping sexual content creators' perceptions of TikTok's platform governance aligns with the sexual context collapse framework. The framework, as previously discussed, highlights how creators navigate the complexities of TikTok's content moderation by drawing upon their understanding of collapsed, colliding, and condensed contexts. In this context, the collapsed context represents the convergence of digital and traditional media influences, as creators reference legacy media norms to interpret TikTok's policies. Similarly, the colliding context emerges as creators negotiate between TikTok's guidelines and societal norms, exemplified by their efforts to maintain content within a "PG-13" boundary.

Finally, the condensed context illustrates how creators discern the platform's boundaries of acceptability, mirroring their understanding of acceptable levels of visibility and permissibility in everyday life. This multidimensional influence on creators' perceptions underscores the nuanced landscape that sexual content creators navigate on TikTok. Their understanding of content moderation is far from one-dimensional, emerging from a complex interplay of influences that span from digital algorithms to offline cultural contexts and societal norms. This dynamic and multifaceted understanding of content moderation highlights the intricate challenges and adaptations within TikTok's content moderation context, as creators strive to find their place within this multifaceted landscape. As one creator articulated in an interview, "If you think of all the magazines and stuff like that, like Sports Illustrated, Men's Health, and things like that; they have people with their shirts off and showing their bodies. So, I think that if we're going to have this discussion about content moderation, those things too have to be taken into consideration." This perspective underscores the need to consider the broader cultural and historical contexts that inform creators' perceptions of content moderation on TikTok.

Now that some of the exterior aspects of knowledge and experience that shape content creators' perspectives on platform governance have been explored, it is essential to delve into the platform-specific factors that influence how creators perceive content moderation and, consequently, their overall perception of the platforms' politics and governance. This focused examination enables us to gain insights into the intricate dynamics at play within the platform network, allowing us to better decipher the nuanced interactions between creators, content moderation practices, and the platform itself. The study's analysis revealed that creators on TikTok develop their understanding of content moderation through a multifaceted approach influenced by direct engagement with the platform's policies, informed by their personal encounters with moderation, and observations from broader media practices.

Empirical evidence, derived from interviews and participatory observation, suggests that creators adopt a trial-and-error method to delineate the parameters of acceptable content. This experiential learning is complemented by proactive research through external sources such as forums and news articles, particularly discussions on Reddit, which creators integrate into their content strategies.

Moreover, community engagement within the platform emerges as a pivotal element, where creators exchange insights and strategies, contributing to a collective intelligence that navigates the evolving landscape of content governance. This tripartite model—encompassing experimentation, external information sourcing, and community interaction—forms a comprehensive framework for creators to strategically maneuver within TikTok's content moderation environment, thereby minimizing the impact of content and performance constraints.

Additional factors contributing to creators' understanding and interpretation of content moderation, as well as the overarching landscape of politics and governance on the platform, were associated with the various entities and elements involved in platform politics and governance concerning moderation. These encompassed TikTok's corporate intermediaries, the algorithm, and the role of other users through mechanisms like user reports and flagging. These multifarious actors and actions were frequently interwoven to construct a comprehensive theoretical framework for elucidating the dynamics of power and politics inherent in content moderation on the platform.

As one Pole Sport and Dancing content creator stated, 'There are times when my videos get flagged or taken down, and it feels like it's not just about violating the guidelines, but maybe someone reported it or the algorithm picked it up as inappropriate, even though I didn't intend it that way.' This intricate interplay between user-driven reporting and algorithmic assessment emerged as a complex facet of content governance that significantly influenced creators' experiences on the platform. First, sexual content creators perceived features for user reports and flagging as powerful catalysts for content removal or deplatforming. They understood that when other users flagged their content as inappropriate or violating community guidelines, it could prompt the platform's automated or manual review processes.

User-reporting mechanisms were often regarded by creators as a form of peer-driven moderation, susceptible to hate and bias, that could jeopardize their content's visibility and accessibility. As one sex worker and "lewd" streamer highlighted, 'For the most part, on TikTok, if the content has been posted already, hard posted, and the automatic algorithm didn’t pull it or flag it for some reason, then the reason that your content was flagged is because someone reported you. So, as a fat woman on the Internet, my

content gets reported constantly - on TikTok and Instagram, and everywhere. People just don’t like me because I'm fat, and that’s cool…I’m just a person existing in the world, and I deserve that.'

Furthermore, creators speculated that algorithmic biases or malfunction might contribute to differential treatment of content, impacting which materials undergo heightened scrutiny or removal. While TikTok's algorithm aims to curate content for users' preferences, participants perceived that inherent biases in algorithms could inadvertently target certain themes or expressions for stricter moderation. This apprehension highlighted creators' concerns about the potential for algorithmic decision-making to introduce unintentional biases, potentially resulting in the suppression of legitimate and creative content. This finding shed light on the creators' growing skepticism about the algorithm's fairness and objectivity. They perceived that the algorithm could inadvertently amplify societal biases and preferences, disproportionately affecting creators who did not conform to conventional beauty standards or who discussed topics considered taboo by mainstream standards. As a result, creators became increasingly cautious about the content they produced, knowing that their visibility and reach on the platform could be influenced by algorithmic dynamics that extended beyond their control.

In this final discussion of the findings on sexual content creators’ understandings of content moderation on TikTok, it's crucial to consider how these creators perceive content moderation as a whole. The study unveiled a diverse range of viewpoints and understandings among sexual content creators, indicating a lack of consensus or widespread awareness regarding the specific guidelines and practices employed by TikTok's content moderation team. Creators demonstrated varying degrees of familiarity with the platform's content policies, resulting in different approaches to content creation and sharing. Some creators exhibited a more nuanced understanding of the guidelines, making deliberate efforts to adhere to them. In contrast, others had a more limited awareness and were prone to inadvertently violating the rules. Additionally, some creators interpreted TikTok's policies regarding sexual content as relatively lenient, allowing for suggestive but non-explicit content to be shared without repercussions. This interpretation led to the creation of content that pushed the boundaries.

On the contrary, there were creators who held a more cautious interpretation of the guidelines. They were well-versed in the rules and procedures to a professional degree, actively avoiding potentially controversial topics or themes to minimize the risk of their content being flagged or removed. This approach resulted in more conservative content focused on non-explicit topics like lifestyle, fashion, or comedy. Some creators took a proactive approach to content moderation by engaging in discussions and collaborations with their audience to ensure compliance with the platform's policies. They sought feedback and guidance from their followers, actively involving them in shaping their content to align with or challenge the system of moderation.

The creators' lack of clarity regarding the terms of moderation on TikTok was further evident in the content they produced. They openly discussed and interpreted TikTok's policies within their own videos, engaging in multifaceted conversations about content distribution and moderation systems. These discussions involved creators making assumptions and offering imaginative explanations about the platform's content distribution and moderation system, often drawing from their personal experiences. Through this ongoing dialogue, creators actively sought to navigate and comprehend the intricacies of content moderation, striving to make informed decisions about their own content.

For example, creators would speculate on the factors influencing their video's visibility on the FYP, theorizing about the role of hashtags, engagement metrics, or even the algorithm's preference for certain types of content. Others engaged in passionate debates about the application of content moderation policies, sharing their interpretations of what constituted acceptable or unacceptable content within the platform's guidelines. Some creators directly called out the platform for transparency and fairness issues. Overall, these discussions fostered a sense of community among creators, connecting them and the platform. They collectively grappled with the challenges and ambiguities of content distribution and moderation on TikTok, contributing to a shared learning and advocacy process that shaped their understanding and informed their navigation of content creation on the platform.

Creators actively, and often, shared their personal experiences and interpretations of content moderation rules across various communication channels on TikTok. These channels include live

discussions, video content, video titles, video replies, profile description, and comments and comment replies and pins. A common practice among creators is stitching other creators' videos, utilizing this feature to either validate or debunk different theories or interpretations related to content moderation. This vibrant knowledge-sharing network, facilitated by TikTok's duet and stitch features, highlights the existence of an active communal learning process within the platform's community. Through these interactions and discussions, creators collectively embark on the journey of deciphering the intricacies of the TikTok algorithm, encompassing both its algorithmic distribution and automated moderation aspects. This communal learning process plays a pivotal role in shaping creators' comprehension of content moderation practices. Moreover, it fosters a sense of community-driven knowledge exchange on the platform, allowing creators to collaboratively navigate the complexities of TikTok's content governance.

The collaborative interactions and discussions among creators on TikTok give rise to a unique digital network where information and interpretations interconnect, potentially forming what can be termed a "colluded context" of content moderation. In this colluded context, creators collectively shape their understanding of TikTok's content guidelines, sharing personal anecdotes, insights, and hypotheses about the platform's algorithmic and moderation processes. While this communal learning process serves as a valuable source of knowledge and solidarity, it also introduces a layer of complexity. The shared interpretations and assumptions about content moderation may not always align with the platform's actual policies and practices, and thus, creators may inadvertently propagate misconceptions or biases within this collaborative space. This theoretical framework raises questions about the accuracy and reliability of the knowledge exchanged within the creator community, highlighting the need for creators to critically assess the veracity of the information they encounter. The colluded context underscores the power of collective sense-making in shaping creators' perceptions of content moderation, even as it poses challenges related to potential misinterpretations and misinformation.

Finally, when it came to understanding content moderation in general, creators held strong opinions about the necessity of it and the lengths sexual content should be moderated on TikTok and beyond. Creators' perspectives on content moderation revealed a dichotomy between the recognition of its

necessity for platform integrity and the pushback against stringent controls over sexual content. The empirical evidence from interviews with a broad spectrum of TikTok creators demonstrates a complex understanding of moderation's dual role: protecting users while allowing for freedom of expression. The range of perspectives on content moderation among sexual content creators on TikTok can be significantly attributed to their varied experiences of 'sexual context collapse' or the reduction of diverse sexual narratives into a homogenized category, often leading to indiscriminate content restriction by platform moderation algorithms. Creators whose content is largely educational or suggestive, yet non-explicit, may view moderation as a necessary mechanism that maintains community standards and protects viewers. This perspective is informed by an understanding that moderation serves as a guardrail, keeping the platform accessible and safe for a wider audience.

On the other end of the spectrum, creators who engage with more explicitly sexual themes often confront the harsher end of moderation practices. They tend to perceive these practices as punitive measures that unduly suppress legitimate expressions of sexuality. This perception is rooted in their experiences with the platform's content governance, where the nuances of their content are overlooked in the broad sweep of moderation. Such creators see 'sexual context collapse' as a process that fails to differentiate between the overtly sexual and the sexually nuanced, leading to a homogenization that disadvantages those whose content is more direct in its sexual expression. These differing experiences with content moderation illustrate the complex interplay between creator intent, platform policies, and the broad spectrum of sexual content that defies simple categorization.

In conclusion, the diverse experiences of sexual content creators with TikTok's content moderation system offer a deeper insight into the broader mechanics of platform politics and governance. Creators at different points of the sexual content spectrum not only confront varying degrees of moderation but also engage with underlying governance structures in distinct ways. This engagement highlights the power imbalances and decision-making processes within TikTok's ecosystem. For creators producing more explicit content, the experience of stricter moderation reflects a governance system that may prioritize certain norms and values, often at the cost of marginalizing others. On the other hand,

those producing educational or suggestive content navigate these waters with a different set of challenges, often finding themselves advocating for clearer guidelines and equitable treatment. Thus, understanding content moderation on TikTok is not just about navigating the rules but also about understanding the platform's broader political and governance landscape, which influences these rules and their application.

6.4. Influences: User-Agency in Shaping Platform Governance

In addition to exploring the experiences and perspectives of sexual content creators on TikTok, this study scrutinized their proactive endeavors to assert agency and shape the platform's governance. More specifically, the study homed in on the deliberate actions undertaken by both individual creators and collectives to advocate for alterations in, or resistance to, the policies, practices, and outcomes governing content distribution and moderation on TikTok, as well as on online platforms more broadly. The impetus behind these initiatives emanated from a resolute desire to challenge or influence the regulations and assessments that guided the moderation of user-generated content.

The research revealed that creators employed a diverse array of advocacy methods, spanning individual actions such as reporting problematic content or appealing moderation decisions to collective undertakings like organizing campaigns, petitions, or online movements to spotlight specific issues. These concerted efforts underscored a broader recognition of the profound influence and repercussions that content moderation policies could wield over the platform's ecosystem, user experiences, and the preservation of freedom of expression. Within this aspect of the investigation—focused on efforts to shape content moderation—attention was directed towards the physical and emotional reactions triggered by encounters with content moderation, as well as the strategic approaches adopted by sexual content creators in their pursuit of influencing content moderation on TikTok. This provided valuable insights into their motivations, methodologies, and the outcomes they achieved.

First, the study's findings pertaining to creators' endeavors to shape platform governance signify their active role in contemporary discussions about the regulation and operation of digital spaces. These creators, in their attempts to influence TikTok's content distribution and moderation systems, embody a

novel form of participatory platform politics. Their suggestions for change, spanning various aspects of content policies and enforcement, highlight their nuanced understanding of the platform's impact on sexual expression and discourse. This demonstrates a shift in the perception of creators from mere content producers to influential contributors in discussions surrounding platform governance. Their experiences underline the evolving dynamics of digital activism, as creators leverage their platform-specific expertise to advocate for more inclusive and sensitive content policies. The creators' insights provide a valuable resource for understanding contemporary interpretations of how platforms are governed, highlighting the role of platform politics in shaping the landscape of sexual content. As these creators offer ideas for reform, they contribute to a dialogue that could potentially foster a more equitable and responsive environment for creators and audiences engaging with sexual content on TikTok.

Numerous participants in the study demonstrated a proactive approach to influencing platform politics and governance, employing various strategies to drive change. Many creators aimed to indirectly impact the platform by leveraging their digital presence to raise awareness and spark conversations among their audience. These creators chose the path of self-advocacy through their content creation itself. One participant in the study, for instance, recounted launching a series of posts that meticulously detailed instances where their content had been flagged or removed, drawing a stark comparison with similar unchallenged content. This tactical approach sought to shed light on the inconsistencies inherent in content moderation practices while rallying support and solidarity from their follower base.

Some creators were observed initiating collective efforts to rally against specific content moderation issues, spearheading online campaigns that systematically questioned and critiqued the platform's moderation criteria, thereby amplifying their advocacy for more transparent and equitable policies. In their pursuit of this activism, these creators crafted content that not only showcased their grievances with the platform's moderation actions but also directly challenged the underlying policies and practices. By provocatively inviting users to engage in critical introspection, these creators aimed to stimulate contemplation about the rationale and fairness of the platform's governance mechanisms. These firsthand accounts from sexual content creators also provide compelling insights into the multifaceted

nature of content moderation, spotlighting the malleability and seemingly subjective nature of its enforcement.

These findings underscore the active role creators play in shaping platform dynamics and policy discourse. Creators' strategies range from subtle awareness-raising tactics to bold challenges of existing policies, each contributing to platform politics. As these creators deploy their unique vantage points to advocate for more consistent, transparent, and fair governance, their collective efforts are propelling a revaluation of content moderation practices within the TikTok ecosystem. This not only highlights the creators' pivotal role in molding digital platforms but also emphasizes the potential for meaningful change that emerges from the grassroots level of digital agency and activism.

For example, some creators, in their efforts to circumvent the complexities of platform regulations and societal norms, employed strategic creative tactics that blurred or merged the lines between various sexual contexts. Recognizing the challenges of the collapsed sexual context, where the platform failed to distinguish between different nuances and intentions behind sexual content, creators used innovative means to make their voices heard. They intertwined their content with broader, mainstream performative elements and trends, essentially engaging in what can be viewed as a form of colluded sexual context. This deliberate blending allowed them to communicate nuanced messages about their content, all while skirting around stringent platform restrictions. For instance, by overlaying text within a video or using captions, some creators were observed to not only highlight perceived inconsistencies in moderation but also subtly collude their intended message with more widely accepted forms of content.

Such practices were more than just about questioning the fairness of platform policies. They became tools to navigate the landscape of content moderation, where distinct sexual contexts often found themselves indistinctly merged, leading to potential misinterpretations of the creator's intentions. These expressions of discontent or confusion, while highlighting creators' struggles, also shed light on their adeptness in managing the ever-blurring lines of sexual context on the platform. They mobilized their content to engage in a dialogue with their audiences, making them active participants in the challenges

they encountered. Through these acts of creative resistance, they exhibited personal agency and also contributed to fostering a collective understanding among community members.

The study also revealed that creators within TikTok's sexual content community demonstrated exceptional adaptability in response to the platform's content governance mechanisms, or governance by the platform. This adaptability was a central theme in interviews and emerged as a key strategy in video content analysis. Creators employed a range of tactics, including the use of coded language, filters, and symbolic elements, to navigate content moderation restrictions and enhance content distribution. For instance, during interviews, creators frequently emphasized their use of euphemisms, metaphors, technical affordances and features, and subtle visual cues to convey their messages related to sex and sexuality without explicitly violating moderation policies. They explained how these strategies allowed them to maintain a delicate balance between capturing attention and avoiding algorithmic scrutiny or peer reporting, which could lead to content removal or account suspension. This seemingly simple act of managing visibility carried with it an entire adaptive culture; characterized by shared symbols, language, and technical/material adaptations, which was consistently observed across interviews and in the analysis of video content. It emerged as an integral aspect of how creators within the sexual content community on TikTok interacted with the platform.

The adaptive culture observed among creators within TikTok's sexual content community is intricately woven into the dynamics of sexual content collusion, sexual context collapse, and sexual context collision. It represents more than just a response to content moderation; it's a dynamic ecosystem where creators collaborate, contend, and converge. Sexual content collusion, involving the collective sharing of tactics and knowledge, is at the heart of this culture. Creators actively collaborate, fostering a sense of solidarity and resistance against the platform's restrictions. Collusion extends beyond the sharing of tactics and knowledge. It also manifests through the intentional reproduction of specific sexual contexts and narratives within their content performances, further reinforcing a shared cultural identity and challenging the platform's limitations.

Additionally, the study found creators employed filters and visual effects as a deliberate strategy to obscure or modify their content in ways that would allow it to evade automated moderation systems. By applying these filters or visual effects, such as blurring or distorting elements of their videos, creators demonstrated their ability to manipulate the appearance of their content to reduce the likelihood of being flagged or detected by automated moderation algorithms. This strategic use of filters and visual effects served as a form of camouflage, allowing creators to skillfully navigate the fine line between adhering to platform guidelines and expressing their intended messages on topics related to sex and sexuality. It is a vivid example of their resourcefulness and adaptability in finding innovative methods to work within the confines of content moderation systems, all while effectively conveying their ideas and sustaining engagement with their audience.

The re-appropriation of the platform's technical affordances and features, to camouflage sexual content and bypass content moderation, at times resulted in the emergence of widely used trends. One notable trend involved the exploitation of an AI feature that transformed photos into AI-generated characters. Creators discovered a loophole in this platform feature, leveraging it to share explicit content by applying photos of their genitals to the AI filter, which then appeared as an AI-generated image as well as a smaller image of the original photo. As a result, thousands of "dick pics" proliferated on TikTok’s FYP, posing a significant challenge to the platform's content moderation efforts and causing disruptions in the user experience. This observation highlights the ingenuity of creators in finding unconventional ways to navigate content moderation systems and exploit platform features, ultimately impacting the platform's governance and the boundaries of acceptable content on TikTok. This trend of exploiting the AI feature to share explicit content demonstrates the ongoing cat-and-mouse game between creators and content moderation algorithms. As the platform develops and implements new technologies to detect and remove inappropriate content, creators continuously seek innovative ways to dodge these systems and maintain their visibility.

Another adaptive response observed among creators was their strategic approach to filming and camera angles in order to navigate the limitations imposed by automated content moderation systems.

Creators recognized that the algorithm and automated systems primarily relied on visual cues to detect and flag explicit or sexual content. In response, creators strategically positioned their bodies and objects within the frame to conceal or obscure explicit content, making it less detectable to the automated algorithms. They carefully considered the foreground and background elements of their videos to create a visual illusion that masked the explicit nature of the content. This included adjusting lighting conditions, using creative framing techniques, and employing strategic positioning of objects or body parts to convey a sexual message without triggering immediate removal or restrictions. By employing these tactics, creators aimed to find a delicate balance between expressing their sexual content and staying within the bounds of the platform's guidelines. This adaptive practice showcased the ingenuity and resourcefulness of creators in navigating the challenges posed by content moderation on TikTok, as they sought to maintain visibility and engagement while avoiding potential content violations.

Additionally, the study found that sexual content creators, particularly those focusing on sexual education and advocacy, have adeptly employed props and visual cues as a strategic tool. These range from illustrations, diagrams, and animations to less explicit imagery. This nuanced use of visuals is a testament to the creators' commitment to delivering informative content while adhering to TikTok's guidelines, demonstrating their adaptability and resourcefulness in the face of content moderation challenges. However, this approach also intertwines with the complex phenomena of sexual context collusion, collision, and collapse on TikTok. The strategic use of visual cues, while essential for some creators to communicate educational content, could inadvertently contributes to a homogenization of sexual narratives. This results in a 'collusion' of contexts where diverse sexual expressions are visually standardized, leading to a 'collision' where the intended educational or advocacy messages may be obscured or misinterpreted due to reliance on symbolic communication. Furthermore, the strategy leads to a 'collapse' of sexual contexts, as the intricate spectrum of sexual content is compressed into a narrow, visually acceptable range.

Notably, within this spectrum, some creators employ hyper-sexualized visuals or props, ostensibly under the banner of education, but with content that veers towards the explicit. This creates a

contentious space where the line between education and titillation is blurred, and the 'pedagogical shield' is used to justify content that may not genuinely serve an educational purpose. Such practices not only challenge the integrity of sexual education on the platform but also contribute to the complexity of content moderation, as they necessitate a discerning approach to distinguish between genuinely educational content and that which exploits these loopholes for broader appeal.

This multifaceted use of visual cues on TikTok, ranging from genuine educational efforts to more questionable uses under the guise of pedagogy, underscores a significant challenge in digital content moderation. It highlights the need for more sophisticated, context-sensitive moderation policies that can effectively differentiate between varied intentions and expressions of sexual content. The scenario illustrates a broader struggle within digital spaces to balance creative expression, educational integrity, and platform guidelines, while acknowledging and addressing the nuances inherent in sexual discourse.

It is noteworthy to account that TikTok appeared to permit sexual education content creators to share relatively realistic diagrams of sexual organs, allowing for a certain level of anatomical accuracy and educational value while adhering to the platform's guidelines. There appeared to be a greater leniency regarding the inclusion of specific sex toys in educational, sexual content. However, this apparent loophole and potential double standard were exploited by certain sex edutainment content creators who repurposed or fetishized sexual education videos, blurring the boundaries between sex education and sexual entertainment. These creators showed a comprehensive understanding of the verbal-visual choreography necessary to walk the fine line between what is deemed acceptable and what may be subject to deplatforming. By adopting this approach, they clearly aimed to balance between pushing the boundaries of what is permissible and avoiding outright violations of TikTok's content guidelines.

In addition to the use of props and visual cues, the study found that sexual content creators of all kinds frequently post content and employ live sessions to share and discuss their experiences with content moderation, highlighting a widespread discourse on content governance within the community. Although it was commonly referred to, namely, as "the TikTok algorithm" and "moderation" within the community, the practices and experiences shared by sexual content creators in relation to content moderation

encompass the broader concept of content governance. By acknowledging the widely-participated-in discourse on content governance among these creators, the study found a deeper understanding of their perceptions and perspectives on platform governance, revealing the intricate interplay between their lived experiences and the dynamics of content governance within the TikTok's content ecosystem that affected them.

Multiple creators producing sexual education content were observed posting content and hosting live stream sessions to recount their encounters with deplatforming and to find ways to avoid these encounters. For example, a video encountered during the observation, captioned "Live ban for 7 days", a sex work lifestyle content creator stated:

> *"Okay TikTok, come here and listen real close TikTok. Having a conversation about sex and sex work and what that looks like is not glorifying solicitation. TikTok, you need to stop allowing automated bans to happen because of a seven-day ban - for something I've been doing on this account for a very, very long time… after all the educational content I've provided… It is so fudging annoying. While we appeal this ridiculous ban for 7 days for doing nothing, we are going to go over to @[redacted]"...[cuts to screenshot of ban appeal interface].*

This message, and many alike, prompt conversations among viewers concerning similar experiences and sharing strategies for navigating content moderation policies. By speaking out about their deplatforming experiences, these creators aimed to raise awareness about the potential biases and limitations of content moderation systems, advocate for the rights of sexual content creators, and spark discussions about the freedom of expression in digital spaces. These moments of deplatforming became pivotal moments for creators to assert the value and impact of their work, reinforcing their commitment to fostering a more open and accepting environment for sexual content on TikTok and beyond.

In another instance, one creator emphasized *in* their content the educational and informative nature *of* their content, aiming to dispel misconceptions and assert the significance of their work. The sex education content creator explained during their live session:

> *"TikTok has started removing my content again. This time, it was the video of me dancing to Billie Eilish's bad guy, in which there were literally zero things against community guidelines. So, instead of bitching and complaining like usual, I wanted to take this time to talk to you guys about why I post what I post on here. For those of you who don't know, I grew up in the middle of*

> *nowhere in [redacted], in the deeply Republican part. My school's idea of sex education was giving us a brief overview of our body parts and telling us not to have sex. So, as a teenager, I took it upon myself to learn what I liked and what I didn't like; and I got shamed for it the entire fucking time. So, my work here is two-fold: first and foremost, I want to educate you guys because clearly our education system isn't doing it. And, secondly, I hope to inspire at least one woman to not be ashamed of their sexuality!"*

By engaging in open dialogue with their audience, these creators not only fostered a supportive community, but also raised awareness of the challenges they faced within the platform's content moderation system. These creators played a crucial role in destigmatizing these topics, promoting empathy, and encouraging a more nuanced and compassionate discourse around sex and sexual content on TikTok. Through their efforts, they sought to reshape societal perceptions, dismantle stereotypes, and advocate for the recognition and respect of sex work as a legitimate profession.

Their openness and vulnerability not only humanized their own experiences but also contributed to a broader understanding and acceptance of diverse sexual expressions and identities within the TikTok community and beyond. For example, a video was encountered by a sex work content creator posted with the caption "TT is up to their old tricks. #stopthehate #stopbanningus #stopbanningusTikTok, #stopbanningsexed." The video contained no audio, but the creator wrote on the video using visual text:

> *"Since I filmed that live, [TikTok] also removed my post calling [TikTok] out for removing s3xworkers. They removed it for "nud!ty and s3xual activity. They also removed [redacted]'s video duetting me to spread the word. S3x education is NOT A BAD THING. Stop removing our content. We are legitimate educators and a benefit to society. #stopbanningus #stopbanningsexed.*

Conversely, a creator account centred on sex work content discussed the challenges of maintaining their account without encountering restrictions or bans:

> *"Another live ban. Ah, surprise surprise. Appeal submitted, but it probably won't get allowed. I'm going to turn the comments off on here, because we all know it's gonna get bombarded with [scam] accounts saying "you need to contact this person" or "buy this to code to get unbanned." Guys, don't forget, I have a backup account…that's why we have backup accounts, because heaven forbid we should talk about sex work and sex or anything like that….Dear TikTok, I am a sex worker in [redacted] where sex work is legal. Talking about sex work is not glorifying sex work. It is just talking about a job that people have. There's nothing particularly sexy or exciting going on in my live [streams]. We're just having the conversations *sighs*"*

In addition to shedding light on the situation, creators were observed employing a proactive strategy by posting "follow-up" videos addressing their content's removal. These videos served multiple purposes, including providing context, complying with platform guidelines, and directing their audience to alternative platforms where the content remained accessible. For example, the researcher encountered a video that a creator posted introducing their backup account, which they created as a precaution in case their original account gets banned due to content moderation. The creator explains that they created the second account to continue providing educational content, sharing information, and coaching people. They encourage viewers who have found their backup account to follow their main account and express their gratitude for the opportunity to continue sharing knowledge:

> *"So, over on my other [account] I've had all these videos be reported for violating community guidelines. So, I've created this second [account] to continue educating, sharing information, and continue doing proxy coaching for people on here. So, if you've found this [account], go ahead and follow my main [account]. And thanks for joining me here on my backup account. Hopefully we can press forward with some more education and information."*

The content analysis further confirmed this strategy, as numerous content pieces depicted this proactive and reactive actions. For instance, a licensed sex therapist, who creates sexual education content, demonstrated this reactive strategy by performing a live stream in which they acknowledged that their prior live stream had been ended due to a violation of community guidelines. In response, they offered a revised version of the content that complied with the platform's policies. By doing so, they aimed to address the issue, maintain a presence on TikTok, and continue delivering valuable sexual education content to their audience within the confines of the platform's guidelines.

Similarly, a cam model took a pre-emptive approach by sharing a follow-up video in which they informed their audience that their content had been removed from TikTok. They then directed their audience to external platforms where their content remained accessible, thus ensuring that their followers could still engage with their content despite its removal from TikTok. This strategic move allowed the creator to maintain their online presence, retain their audience, and navigate the content moderation challenges imposed by the platform.

These examples demonstrate how creators responded to the removal of their content by taking proactive measures to address the issue and maintain their connection with their audience. Their follow-up videos served as a means of adaptation, enabling them to continue their work and engage with their followers in alternative ways, while also highlighting the limitations and complexities of content moderation on TikTok. Besides posting reaction videos and follow-up videos in response to the removal of sexual content, creators also exhibited a shift in their content style or tone following these experiences, showing the impact of content moderation practices on their creative decisions.

Within this relationship between creators and platform governance, the findings reveal a compelling temporal dimension to their engagement strategies. Creators employ both synchronous and asynchronous tactics, as observed through interviews and video content analysis, representing two interwoven timelines of engagement. Through asynchronous methods, such as content posting, creators document, critique, and disseminate their experiences, creating digital footprints that persist over time. This approach allows them to convey their concerns and challenges in an enduring manner. Conversely, synchronous tools like live streaming enable creators to engage in real-time dialogues, providing immediate insights, support, and knowledge-sharing. By utilizing TikTok's affordances in these multifaceted ways, creators transcend the role of mere content producers navigating platform constraints; they actively advocate for a reconceptualization of these very affordances.

Sexual content creators, while navigating TikTok's moderation framework in these ways, exemplify the paradigm of 'sexual content collusion.' This reflects their strategic collaboration and convergence to share, adapt, and evolve in response to platform constraints caused by sexual context collapse and avoidance of sexual context collusion. Responding to these dual challenges, 'sexual content collusion' emerges as a survival strategy. It embodies the collective efforts of creators to collaborate, share insights, and adapt their content to mitigate the pitfalls of context collapse and collision. Through this collaboration, creators form a united front, pooling their experiences and strategies to better navigate the platform's constraints, ensuring that their diverse voices are heard without being diluted or misinterpreted. In essence, 'sexual content collusion' is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of

sexual content creators as they wrestle with the complexities of digital spaces, pushing against the limitations imposed by an often-misunderstood amalgamation of sexual contexts.

In the context of content collusion, where sexual content creators converge to adapt to platform constraints, humor, satire, and symbolism have emerged as pivotal tactics. Creators, in interviews, highlighted the significance of humor and satire as performative strategies for navigating TikTok's content moderation. These approaches enable them to directly connect with audiences addressing sexual topics, while indirectly mitigating the risk of content removal or shadow banning. In this process, creators frequently utilize symbolism and metaphorical representations in their content, conveying their intended messages while evading automated detection systems. These strategies serve as instruments of influence, giving agency to creators to challenge and negotiate in the platform’s governance.

The strategic maneuvering, embedded in the creators’ performances, illustrate their profound understanding of 'platform governmentalities,' encompassing how platforms control and shape users and content through policies and algorithms. Through these mechanisms, such as those depicted below, creators subtly critique moderation policies, stimulate discourse, and consequently influence the definition of acceptable content on the platform. These findings underscore how creators, particularly those producing sexual content, adeptly navigate TikTok's constraints through the use of humor, satire, and symbolic content. This isn't merely about entertainment; it's a calculated strategy deeply rooted in the dynamics of sexual context collapse.

Sexual context collapse becomes particularly pronounced within these comedic performances. The ever-shifting nature of TikTok's content moderation policies often results in a generalized, flattened understanding of sexual content, inadvertently treating diverse sexual expressions and identities as one indistinguishable mass. Creators, recognizing this collapsed view, ingeniously collapse their own sexual contexts further, in their content, through satire and symbolic content. For instance, a creator might employ a universally recognized symbol, such as a fruit or flower, to subtly hint at a particular sexual theme without being overt. Another tactic involves creators leveraging comedic sketches that, on the surface, might appear unrelated to any sexual topic but, upon closer inspection, contain nuanced

references intelligible to those within certain sexual communities. Over time, as these sketches gain popularity, they often become codified as content scripts on TikTok, crystallizing into a shared form of digital vernacular.

This process of reproduction is particularly evident when original soundtracks from these sketches are extracted and reused across various videos, reinforcing, and amplifying the coded message. As more creators adopt and iterate upon these soundtracks in their content, a fascinating evolution occurs. What began as a singular, perhaps subversive, comedic sketch morphs into a widespread trend, with multiple creators putting their unique spin on the theme, further embedding its presence on the platform. The continual repetition and reinterpretation of these soundtracks make them a recognizable motif for TikTok users, even if they weren't privy to the original context. In this manner, the collapsed context gets reproduced and proliferated.

While the surface narrative remains innocuous, the underlying sexual context persists, subtly resisting the platform's moderation efforts. This cyclical process ensures that while the platform's moderation tools may catch overt expressions of sexuality, the more coded, and thus resilient, expressions continue to flourish, effectively becoming a part of TikTok's content DNA. Through these iterative performances, creators not only challenge the limitations imposed by the platform but also construct an evolving tapestry of shared narratives, defying the constraints of a collapsed context.

Before concluding this discussion, it's essential to highlight a significant point: the study's findings uncover the pervasive uncertainty surrounding TikTok's content reinstatement policies, shedding light on the ambiguity that creators frequently contend with after deplatforming, which in turn leads to emotions of frustration and confusion. This ambiguity highlights a fundamental gap in platform governance, where creators are expected to adhere to community guidelines and content moderation policies, yet these guidelines remain vaguely defined. Consequently, the absence of clear reinstatement policies or mechanisms to challenge deplatforming decisions establishes an unequal power dynamic, leaving creators, despite their significance to these platforms, feeling disempowered and undervalued.

The research also revealed that TikTok exhibited limited accountability in addressing content removals or deplatforming decisions in this context, leaving creators with few avenues for recourse. This power asymmetry crystallizes in the realm of affective politics, reflecting an imbalanced relationship between the platform and creators engaged in the politics of visibility. The power dynamics at play in this relationship are intricate. Creators employ their content to challenge and shape platform policies, advocating for transparent and equitable practices. However, these efforts to influence occur within the broader context of a platform that retains ultimate authority over content moderation and distribution.

The platform's opaque content removal processes and limited appeal channels create an environment where creators' attempts to assert influence often encounter barriers, further accentuating a significant power imbalance. The platform's strategic position as the gatekeeper to visibility and audience engagement profoundly affects creators' aspirations, rendering the politics of visibility a complex negotiation shaped by the platform's governance framework. This tension between creators' agency and the platform's authority exemplifies the intricate relationship underpinning the multifaceted interplay of platform politics and sexual content creation on TikTok.

The asymmetrical power dynamic between platforms and creators extends universally to all TikTok creators, influencing the visibility and accessibility of their content. However, this power dynamic assumes distinct dimensions when it concerns sexual content creators. The inherently sensitive nature of sexual content renders it susceptible to heightened scrutiny, resulting in more frequent content removals and deplatforming. This dynamic amplifies the platform's authority over creators involved in sexual content production. The content's potential to challenge societal norms, question taboos, and advocate for marginalized perspectives further complicates this relationship. The combination of the platform's strategic control over visibility and its role in shaping cultural narratives empowers it to influence the discourse surrounding sexuality.

Paradoxically, despite this power asymmetry, the study unveiled a phenomenon: sexual content creators exhibited a profound understanding of platform governance systems. These creators demonstrated acute awareness of the nuances of content moderation, community guidelines, and appeals

processes. This knowledge enabled them to strategically navigate the platform's parameters and limitations, often leveraging loopholes and aligning with algorithmic preferences to amplify their content's visibility. Their capacity to masterfully negotiate the complexities of the platform highlighted their resilience and adaptability within a context marked by content removals and uncertain reinstatement policies. The creators' ability to strategically employ their understanding of platform governance systems in pursuit of visibility and advocacy showcases their agency within a digital landscape that attempts to confine and regulate sexual expression. This engagement with platform governance underscores the intricacies of power, resistance, and negotiation that underpin the interplay between creators and platforms, ultimately shaping the evolving landscape.

6.5. Conclusion.

This chapter has offered an in-depth exploration of the nuanced realities faced by sexual content creators on TikTok. Through meticulous examination of their experiences with, understandings of, and attempts to influence content moderation, the chapter reveals how these creators navigate the platform's complex and often restrictive content governance landscape, highlighting their resilience, adaptability, and the broader implications for digital expression and platform policy. Analysis of the study’s findings illustrate the intricate dance of compliance and creativity that creators perform. Faced with TikTok's opaque and arbitrary content moderation policies and actions, creators continuously adapt their aesthetic and performance in content. This adaptability isn't merely a survival tactic; it's an act of subtle resistance and negotiation with the platform's norms. Their strategies, ranging from modifying content to fit within the ambiguous boundaries of acceptability to more covert forms of expression, underscore a persistent quest for visibility and voice in an environment that frequently marginalizes their narratives.

The analysis of the findings also probes into the creators' perceptions of TikTok's moderation mechanisms. This exploration sheds light on the creators' experiences of uncertainty and inconsistency in content moderation, which significantly shapes their content strategies. The formulation of 'folk theories' to navigate and sometimes subvert these opaque governance structures not only reflects their resilience

but also underscores a critical gap in TikTok's communication and policy enforcement strategies. Furthermore, the analysis highlights the proactive and collective efforts of these creators to shape platform governance. From appealing against content takedowns to engaging in broader advocacy for more equitable and transparent content moderation practices, these actions represent a significant push towards redefining the power dynamics between creators and the platform. This aspect of the findings illuminates the emerging role of content creators as active stakeholders in the digital ecosystem, influencing policy and governance beyond their immediate content creation activities.

Significantly, the analysis conducted in this chapter illuminates the intricate and often contentious intersection of platform politics and individual agency within TikTok's ecosystem. Far from being passive recipients of platform policies, sexual content creators on TikTok emerge as active, dynamic agents. They engage with, challenge, and at times, cleverly subvert the platform's governance structures. The empirical data gathered in this study reveals that these creators are not merely adapting to the constraints imposed by TikTok; they are actively reshaping the contours of these constraints. This demonstrates a level of agency that goes beyond mere compliance, reflecting a deep understanding of and engagement with the platform's governance mechanisms. Moreover, the data indicates that an overwhelming amount of these creators have participated in or initiated collective actions aimed at advocating for more transparent and fair content moderation practices.

The chapter’s analysis, therefore, does more than just document the experiences of these creators. It offers a nuanced understanding of how individual agency can intersect with, and at times, challenge the prevailing norms of platform governance. The actions and strategies of TikTok's sexual content creators are emblematic of a larger trend in digital content creation, where creators are increasingly aware of and engaged in the politics of platform ecosystems. Their experiences and the data derived from this study spotlight the dynamic interplay between user agency and platform control, revealing a landscape where creators are active participants in shaping the rules and norms of digital expression.

The analysis delivers important insights into the realm of digital content creation, with a specific focus on sexual content on social media platforms like TikTok. It goes beyond mere observation,

providing a deep dive into the complex dynamics of sexual content creation, characterized by an intricate spectrum of expression. The study documents the various ways in which sexual content is presented, interpreted, and moderated on TikTok, shedding light on the nuanced interplay between creator intent and platform policy. This is not just about content creation; it's a revealing look at the broader social and cultural implications of how sexual content is managed and perceived in digital spaces.

One of the key contributions of this analysis is the detailed exploration of the phenomena referred to as the 'collapse, collusion, and collision of sexual context' on TikTok. This refers to how diverse sexual narratives, often with distinct meanings and intentions, are indiscriminately lumped together under the platform's content moderation policies. This collapsing of contexts leads to a homogenization of sexual narratives, which in turn affects the visibility and representation of diverse sexual identities and expressions. By systematically examining these dynamics, the study highlights the critical gaps in TikTok's content moderation practices, particularly the need for nuanced and context-sensitive approaches. This insight has profound implications for how social media platforms can and should recognize and respect the diversity of sexual expression.

The study's insights contribute to a deeper understanding of digital content creation dynamics, emphasizing the need for platform governance models that are responsive to the complexities and nuances of sexual content. The resilience and ingenuity demonstrated by the creators in this study are not merely individual successes; they represent a broader trend of content creators actively shaping the discourse around digital expression and challenging restrictive platform environments. These findings underscore the importance of incorporating creators' perspectives in the development of content moderation policies and highlight potential avenues for future research and policymaking in the digital sphere. By bringing these aspects to light, the study makes a compelling case for re-evaluating and reforming current platform governance models, advocating for a more equitable, transparent, and inclusive approach that recognizes the diverse spectrum of digital expression.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

In the culmination of this dissertation, the research journey has been steadfastly dedicated to unraveling two pivotal research questions through rigorous inquiry and empirical investigation. First, the dissertation aimed to explore how sexual content creators on TikTok experience, understand, and wield influence within the platform's politics and governance, shedding light on the intricate relationship between content creators and governance structures, and offering insights into power dynamics and agency on TikTok. Justification for asking this question lies in the unique position sexual content creators occupy at the intersection of platform governance and content creation; their experiences providing insights into how policies and regulations are perceived and navigated within the digital ecosystem.

Second, the research question investigated how their experiences, adaptive strategies, and actions contribute to shaping the broader dynamics of platform politics and governance on TikTok, which is crucial for grasping the nuanced interplay between individual behaviors and overarching governance frameworks and informing discussions on platform regulation and user empowerment. Sexual content creators are not passive recipients of platform policies; they actively engage with and adapt to them, and by studying their experiences, strategies, and actions, insights into the ways in which individual behaviors contribute to shaping the larger governance landscape on TikTok can be uncovered. This inquiry is essential for comprehensively understanding the socio-political dynamics of platform governance and its implications for content creators and users alike.

Asking these research questions advances comprehension of platform politics and governance dynamics in general and specifically on TikTok, illuminating the intricate experiences of content creators, providing crucial insights into their challenges and adaptive strategies within regulatory frameworks of platforms, and offering a nuanced understanding of how content creators' actions influence broader governance dynamics, shaping platform cultures and norms.

To address these foundational research inquiries, this dissertation undertook a multifaceted examination, encompassing empirical research, theoretical frameworks, and critical analysis. In this

concluding chapter, the researcher will directly respond to the research questions by weaving together the rich tapestry of findings and analyses that have unfolded throughout this study. By delving into content creators' interpretations, experiences, and endeavors to influence content governance, the chapter will illuminate the intricate dynamics of power, agency, and norm negotiation within TikTok's content ecosystem. Furthermore, it will explore how the lived experiences and initiatives of content creators reverberate through the broader governance and political landscape within the platform, revealing the intricate interplay between individual agency, platform mechanisms, and the wider dynamics of governance. This chapter encapsulates the synthesis of the exploration into the complex world of TikTok's sexual content creation and governance, offering valuable insights into these dynamics.

7.1. Examining the Experiences, Understandings, and Influences of Sexual Content Creators and Content Creation: Navigating Platforming and Deplatforming in the Context of Deplatformization

Social media content creators engaged in performing and producing sexual contexts in content on TikTok navigate a complex terrain of platform politics and governance, often characterized by shifting ambiguous policies and complex regulatory mechanisms. These creators interpret the platform's governance not just as a set of rules, but as a fluid structure that can be negotiated, challenged, and even reshaped. Their lived experiences, replete with instances of content suppression or promotion, provide a nuanced perspective on the operational realities of TikTok's governance mechanisms. By actively seeking to influence these policies, these creators are asserting their agency, highlighting a tug-of-war between individual creative expression and platform-imposed constraints. Furthermore, their endeavors to mold content governance practices reveal a deeper undercurrent: a bid to democratize platform governance, making it more transparent, inclusive, and accountable. This active engagement, borne out of their personal interactions with the platform, becomes instrumental in broadening the discourse on platform politics. It underscores the critical role of creators in co-constructing platform dynamics, reflecting a broader shift towards decentralized governance models and emphasizing the symbiotic relationship between platforms and their user communities in shaping digital spaces.

The empirical study of the dissertation underscores a layered understanding of the tactics and strategies employed by content creators producing digital sexual content on TikTok as they navigate the labyrinth of platform governance. Rather than being passive recipients of platform policies, these creators emerge as active negotiators, continually calibrating their content in response to TikTok's ever-evolving policies and community standards. Through practices like self-censorship, strategic engagement with algorithms, and nuanced use of hashtags, they deftly manipulate the platform's mechanics to either amplify or shield their content, effectively playing within and sometimes subverting the constraints of platform politics. These individuals are not just content creators but advocates and activists, challenging and redefining content governance boundaries. They don't merely exist within the platform; they actively sculpt it, asserting their identities and advocating for their rights, ultimately enriching the platform's tapestry of expression and representation.

Additionally, the study illuminates the intricate interplay between individual content creators and the broader governance structures within TikTok's content networks. Governance on TikTok is shaped by a myriad of factors, notably the inherent biases embedded within algorithmic content distribution, the opacity of decision-making processes, and the systematic sidelining of sexual content. Ironically, while TikTok's content moderation algorithms strive for community standard compliance, they often misinterpret the spectrum of sexual content, inadvertently entrenching discriminatory practices. Such misinterpretations not only marginalize specific content genres but also risk erasing entire creator identities. This lack of clear differentiation, compounded by a transparency deficit in platform governance, underscores broader concerns: the centralization of power and the susceptibility of algorithms to inherited biases, which in turn, shape the discourse around sexuality on TikTok.

Collectively, this research underscores the role that creators of digital sexual content on TikTok occupy in both adapting to and influencing content governance nuances. Their journeys, interpretations, and strategic maneuvers offer a lens into the labyrinthine challenges of operating within the platform's governance confines. By juxtaposing individual strategies against overarching platform systems and broader governance dynamics, the study delineates the intricate power interplay and its ramifications

within TikTok's content milieu. As such, this research hopefully paves the way for subsequent inquiries, emphasizing the imperative for a governance model that acknowledges the heterogeneity of creator experiences while championing ethical stewardship of digital sexual content.

The findings of this dissertation research offer valuable insights into the advancement of platform governance models and content governance practices that prioritize equity, transparency, and inclusivity. The research highlights the need to move beyond the current paradigm where platforms predominantly operate as corporate spaces driven by profit, and instead reconceptualize them as public spaces that serve the interests of individuals who use them. This requires a reclamation of digital spaces and a shift in power dynamics towards the users themselves. In this sense, the dialectical relationship between platforms and users necessitates a reconceptualization of governance, where individuals actively engage in holding platforms accountable for their actions and decisions. Platforms must recognize the importance of meaningful collaboration with diverse stakeholders and embrace a model of cooperative responsibility. This includes involving users, content creators, activists, policymakers, and other relevant actors in the governance processes, allowing for collective decision-making and shared ownership. Multi-stakeholder governance principles can enable a more inclusive and participatory approach to platform governance, where the interests and concerns of all stakeholders are considered.

Moreover, the governance of digital spaces should reflect the principles of democratic governance observed in material spaces. This entails establishing accountability mechanisms for those elected or appointed to govern platforms, ensuring that their actions align with the values of transparency, fairness, and accountability. Just as democratic governance promotes checks and balances, the governance of digital spaces should incorporate mechanisms to hold platforms accountable for their policies, actions, and content governing practices. To achieve this, independent oversight bodies can be established to monitor and evaluate platforms' adherence to established guidelines and standards. These oversight bodies would have the authority to conduct regular audits of platforms' content governance practices, ensuring compliance with principles of transparency, fairness, and inclusivity. Additionally, mechanisms should be put in place to allow for meaningful user feedback and input in the decision-

making processes of platforms. This can be achieved through, namely, user-councils, advisory boards, or other participatory mechanisms that give users and content creators a voice in shaping content moderation practices.

In this model of collaborative governance, a diverse array of actors, including users, content creators, civil society organizations, and policymakers, actively contribute to shaping platform governance. By involving these stakeholders in the governance processes, platforms can benefit from their varied perspectives, expertise, and experiences. This collaborative approach promotes a holistic and nuanced understanding of the complexities of content moderation, recognizing the need to balance community standards with individual freedoms. Furthermore, this model of governance for digital spaces recognizes the importance of ongoing dialogue and iterative decision-making. It acknowledges that content governance is a dynamic process that requires continuous adaptation and improvement. Through multi-stakeholder governance and open dialogue, platforms can refine their content moderation practices, address emerging challenges, and respond to evolving societal norms and values.

7.2. Implications of the Research Findings

The research findings have implications for understanding and addressing the challenges surrounding the platform politics and governance of sexual content on the social media platforms, TikTok. These implications encompass multiple dimensions, such as, the power structures underlying platform politics and governance; the consequences of deplatforming sex for human sexuality and agency; the interconnectedness of the historical marginalization of sex work with sexual content creation; and the role of visibility politics and affective politics in unraveling the complexities of sexual content governance.

First, the examination of the interplay between power structures and TikTok's platform politics and governance in this study reveal the complex power dynamics that influence the digital landscape of TikTok. In line with many observations before it, the study has shown that digital platforms are not neutral in their governance practices, but rather reproduce and reinforce societal norms and values

surrounding sexuality. Based on the shared experiences and perspectives of sexual content creators, these platforms often prioritize expressions of sexuality that align with mainstream, heteronormative, and socially acceptable standards, while marginalizing or suppressing alternative or non-normative sexual practices. This biased approach reinforces existing power dynamics and social hierarchies in both the digital and physical realms, resulting in multi-dimensional discrimination and marginalization against individuals who deviate from dominant norms. Additionally, these practices not only perpetuate discrimination and marginalization but also undermine the progress society has made in empowering individuals to reclaim autonomy and agency over their own sexual experiences and identities.

Second, the implications are evident in our evolving connection with the innate functions of our bodies. By granting others the authority to define our desires, identities, and knowledge about our bodies, through certain algorithmic and human practices that shape the landscape of sexual content by governing what is deemed acceptable or permissible, we inadvertently experience a disconnection and alienation from our own innate sexual experiences. This external control and imposition of norms disrupts our personal agency and autonomy, undermining our ability to fully explore and embrace our own unique desires, preferences, and boundaries. We become detached from the authenticity of our own sexual experiences, conforming to predefined notions of acceptability, and perpetuating a cycle of external validation and validation-seeking. This disconnection not only hinders our individual growth and self-discovery but also perpetuates societal norms and power structures that limit the free expression of diverse sexualities and the celebration of sexual diversity. Reclaiming agency over our own desires and identities is an essential step towards dismantling these constraints and fostering a more inclusive and empowering digital environment.

At the heart of this reclamation of agency is the profound impact of corporeal politics, where the body becomes a site of contention and political struggle. The transformation from the material body to the digital realm presents a paradoxical landscape of platformization and deplatformization, where constraints and challenges coexist with opportunities for resistance. This struggle is embodied in the laborious process of negotiating, managing, and presenting digital bodies, shaping practices, identities, cultures, and

discourses within online spaces. The platform, as a powerful actor, engages in the politics of visibility and affect by imposing certain norms, biases, and restrictions on creators. It exercises control over content distribution, visibility algorithms, and moderation practices that shape the reach, impact, and visibility of sexual content. The platform's governance decisions, influenced by societal norms and values, favor mainstream, hetero-normative, and socially acceptable expressions of sexuality while marginalizing or suppressing alternative or non-normative practices. This top-down imposition of norms and restrictions limits the agency of creators and perpetuates power imbalances within the digital space. However, creators engage in a constant struggle to challenge these impositions, reclaim their agency, and redefine the boundaries of what is considered acceptable and permissible. Through their content, creators navigate the politics of visibility and affect, pushing back against the platform's constraints and asserting their presence, narratives, and power within the digital ecosystem.

Last, the research findings underscore the profound implication that the stigmatization and discrimination experienced by sexual content creators on TikTok are intrinsically linked to the long-standing marginalization of sex workers, both historically and in contemporary contexts. The stigmatization of sex work has been perpetuated by societal biases, cultural taboos, and moral judgments that have shaped perceptions and norms surrounding sexuality. Sex work challenges dominant notions of morality and productivity, and disrupts traditional power dynamics, making it a target for stigmatization and exclusion. The association between sex work and stigmatization stems from societal attitudes that view sex as a private and intimate act, with commercialization of sex seen as deviant or morally wrong. These prevailing attitudes seep into the realm of digital platforms, influencing content governance policies and algorithmic decisions that prioritize mainstream, socially acceptable expressions of sexuality while marginalizing or suppressing alternative or non-normative or devalued practices.

By extension, sexual content creators who engage in sexualized digital labor and explore diverse and alternative expressions of sexuality face similar stigmatization and discrimination. The mere association with sex, regardless of the context or purpose of the content, often triggers societal judgments and moral outrage. This is further perpetuated by the design features and interfaces of the platforms, as

well as the corporate decisions made in boardrooms, which prioritize social acceptability, adherence to mainstream norms, and financial considerations over the empowerment and freedom of sexual expression. This reflects the broader societal tendency to stigmatize and silence any discussion or representation of sexuality that deviates from normative boundaries, reinforcing the deep-rooted biases and moral values ingrained in cultural and social systems. These biases permeate the design choices and content policies of platforms, shaping the algorithmic processes that govern visibility, engagement, and reach. As a result, sexual content creators who seek to explore diverse and alternative expressions of sexuality encounter systematic barriers and biases that limit their visibility, impact, and potential for meaningful engagement with audiences. The stifling of such discussions and representations perpetuates a culture of shame, hindering the progress towards a more open and inclusive dialogue surrounding human sexuality.

The challenges associated with governing sexual content on social media platforms highlight the need to address the broader societal issues of discrimination, exploitation, and violence. The historical invisibility, marginalization, and exploitation of sex work serve as an example of how these issues are deeply intertwined with content governance practices and the ideological framing of digital content. The stigmatization and discrimination faced by sex workers contribute to the politics of platform governance, leading to the disproportionate targeting and marginalization of sexual content creators. To address these challenges, platform intermediaries must recognize the interconnectedness between the stigmatization of sex work and the discrimination faced by creators exploring diverse sexual expressions and identities. This requires destigmatizing sex work, promoting diverse representations of sexuality, and empowering creators to shape the discourse surrounding sexual content.

7.3. Impacts of Existing Sexual Content Moderation Policies and Procedures in Platform Governance

This examination of TikTok's platform politics and governance, particularly for creators of sexual content, reveals a variety of harms resulting from this platforms' governance systems. By shedding light on and analysing these harms, a more comprehensive picture of the negative challenges faced by sex content creators inside the platform's digital ecology emerges. These harms encompass various

dimensions of the challenges faced by these creators within the platform's ecosystem, including invisibility and marginalization; the reproduction of biases and discrimination; the lack of discernment between different forms of sexual content in content governance; the absence of transparency and accountability in platform politics; and TikTok's contribution to the broader deplatformization of sexual content.

TikTok's platform politics and governance leading to the invisibility and marginalization of sexual content creators, epitomizes a critical, yet often overlooked, aspect of our digital society. These practices, steeped in sociotechnical complexities, reverberate beyond the confines of the platform, instigating wider societal, cultural, and political ramifications. This dissertation study identified that the implications of such governance extend beyond merely suppressing the visibility of sexual content that deviates from dominant societal norms. It unearthed a complex narrative, sexual context collapse, where these practices inadvertently sustain and reinforce enduring patterns of invisibility and marginalization. Rather than an isolated action, the process of content moderation can be seen as a cog in the wider mechanism perpetuating systemic biases. Such actions contribute to an ongoing cycle, where the underrepresentation of diverse sexual identities and experiences continue to be overlooked or erased within digital landscapes. Therefore, this analysis urges a deeper understanding of how such governance strategies, although seemingly benign in intent, can reinforce historical inequities and extend the continuum of exclusion within our increasingly digital societies.

The invisibilization and marginalization of sexual content creators on the platform in particular, far from being an isolated issue, is symptomatic of a systemic obfuscation of sexual information, identities, and cultures. Through an analytical lens, this phenomenon uncovers a latent dynamic where the autonomy individuals ostensibly exercise over their digital sexual identities may be a veneer, subtly constrained by underlying algorithmic governance and unseen structural factors. This induces a cycle of erasure, which stymies the cultivation of inclusive and diverse discourses on sex and sexuality and hinders societal progression in comprehending and accepting the multifaceted aspects of human sexuality. As such, the practice of suppressing sexual information and communication on platforms like TikTok

through their governance mechanisms inadvertently amplifies questions surrounding the depth of individuals' control over their digital sexual identities, spotlighting the potentially restrictive undercurrents veiled by the ostensible freedom of digital spaces.

To analyze further, the suppression of sexual information and communication on platforms such as TikTok through content governance practices could be viewed as a form of 'digital regression.' This perspective unveils an ironic twist in the narrative of digital progression, where instead of facilitating openness and recognition of sexual diversity, governance practices appear to be corroding these very aspects. It compels us to reconsider the supposed liberatory potential of digital platforms, questioning the extent to which they genuinely democratize sexual expression, or conversely, reinscribe and entrench traditional norms and biases under the guise of algorithmic impartiality. The prevailing theme of digital regression intersects with the second dimension of harm unveiled in this study: the reinforcement of societal biases and discriminatory practices via the algorithms that dictate content distribution and moderation - or what is referred to as automated content governance - on platforms like TikTok. This iteration of platform governance exposes the inherent challenges in encoding algorithmic logic to moderate and disseminate content without collapsing context. Specifically, in our case, the moderation of sexual content often witnesses a 'sexual context collapse', where diverse forms of sexual expressions are flattened, misunderstood, or wrongly classified due to the inability of algorithms to appreciate the nuances and complexities of human sexuality.

It is important to recognize that this issue extends beyond just algorithmic encoding. The policies and community guidelines themselves often contribute to this context collapse, reducing complex social realities into simplistic, one-size-fits-all rules. This observation emphasizes the need for more context-sensitive, nuanced policies that can adapt to the diversity and richness of human experiences and cultural expressions. Nevertheless, achieving this balance will always be a struggle, as cultural diversity and varying societal perspectives inherently breed complexity and contradiction. As historically evident, visibility has always been a contested domain, with political struggles over what should be seen and what should remain hidden.

The continued reliance on context collapse in the governance of sexual content, devoid of an approach that appreciates the diversity and complexity of such content, presents significant implications. First, it risks inadvertently marginalizing and excluding legitimate forms of sexual expression, an observation that has been substantiated by the experiences of numerous content creators as identified in the study. This not only diminishes the agency of these creators but also restricts the richness and diversity of content available on the platform. The consequences of this approach extend beyond just content creators; it also compromises the platform's potential to foster a digital environment that acknowledges and respects the multifaceted nature of sexuality. This limitation inhibits the platform's capacity to serve as a space for inclusive dialogue, education, and exploration of diverse sexual expressions and identities.

The research points to a noteworthy absence of transparency and accountability within the mechanisms of platform governance, as well as within the content distribution and moderation on TikTok. This deficiency, identified as the third dimension of harm in this study, has significant implications. Findings from the study highlighted concerns over TikTok's unilateral power to remove or restrict access to sexual content and creators without offering clear justifications or routes for redress. This lack of transparency impacts not only the economic prospects and social interactions of creators but also bestows upon TikTok an unregulated level of influence over the dissemination and accessibility of vital sexual information and dialogues. As the research demonstrates, platforms like TikTok, through their unchecked ability to regulate content networks, have transitioned into powerful ‘gatekeepers’ of digital information and communication(Gillespie, 2018), possessing the power to control the flow of information and dialogue on platform networks.

This research, therefore, exposes a pivotal juncture we currently inhabit in the timeline of the Internet's evolution, a period likely to be demarcated by the power struggles shaping this technology's trajectory. It underscores the ongoing tension between consolidating corporate control over platforms and the push for democratizing them into public utilities and shared social spaces. In this sense, the platformization of sexual information and communication, as the study establishes, introduces an array of

complexities that can either democratize or consolidate power. On the democratizing end of the spectrum, platforms have extended avenues for marginalized voices and communities to disseminate their experiences, contest societal norms, and stimulate discussions on sexual health, rights, and identities. This access and expression democratization could potentially advance inclusivity, diversity, and empowerment. On the other side of the continuum is, however, the concentration of power in the hands of platform operators signals potential concerns about gatekeeping, censorship, and potential restrictions on the range of sexual expressions and perspectives accessible to users.

Additionally, as per the findings of the study, the platform's control over the flow and visibility of sexual content could, in effect, reinforce existing hierarchies, perpetuate biases, and impede progress towards a more inclusive and knowledgeable society. This suggests that we are navigating a period of Internet history wherein platform politics and governance are not merely organizational practices but have become deeply intertwined with societal struggles for visibility, representation, and access. The question of who gets to define platforms' roles and utilities, in this context, is no longer a corporate issue—it's a profoundly political one with far-reaching implications for how we structure and understand digital spaces.

The deplatforming of sexual context in content and sexual content creators on TikTok, and its broader implications for their deplatformization across the Internet, ultimately, denotes a constriction of potentialities. It presents a shrinking window of opportunity to determine the role of digital technology, specifically social media platforms, in mediating human sexuality. This pervasive deplatformization marks a substantial shift in the landscape of human sexuality in the digital age. It results in the alienation, regulation, and marginalization of the availability, visibility, and diversity of sexual content online. The implications of this systemic deplatformization, therefore, resonate much beyond the individual experiences, understandings, and influences of sexual content moderation on TikTok. It points to a larger trend where the technological progress that once amplified our capacities to share, interact with, and converse about sex, is now under the scrutiny and control of corporate entities and algorithmic systems.

The broader ramifications of this trend engender crucial inquiries about digital autonomy, freedom of expression, and the entrenched power dynamics in today's digital landscape.

7.4. Curtain Call: (De)Platformization for whom?

In conclusion, this dissertation has delved into the multifaceted dynamics of platform politics and governance on TikTok, particularly focusing on the experiences and actions of sexual content creators. Throughout our exploration, one question has continuously emerged: (de)platformization for whom? This question encapsulates the overarching theme of power dynamics and agency within digital ecosystems, prompting us to critically examine who holds the power to shape platform policies, whose voices are marginalized, and whose interests are prioritized. By considering (de)platformization from various perspectives, including those of content creators, users, policymakers, and platform owners, we gain a comprehensive understanding of the socio-political implications of governance structures on TikTok and similar platforms. This inquiry not only elucidates the challenges faced by marginalized content creators but also highlights the broader implications for digital rights, freedom of expression, and democratic discourse in the digital age. Moving forward, it is imperative to continue interrogating the (de)platformization processes to ensure that they uphold principles of fairness, inclusivity, and accountability, ultimately fostering more equitable digital environments for all stakeholders involved.

Having reached the concluding stage of this dissertation’s inquiry, it becomes imperative to reflect on the opportunities as well as the associated limitations that lie ahead for user agency in platform politics and governance. Analyzing content creators and their digital labour within the sexualized spectrum through the intricate prism of platform governance and content moderation has unveiled the many contradictions that punctuate platformization and deplatformization. This duality, of opportunity and restraint, amplifies the fundamental question pervading the overarching research theme: (de)platformization for whom?

When we ask this question, we emphasize the selective and divisive nature of platformization, highlighting the uneven distribution of opportunities and constraints it brings, particularly when focused

on creators of sexual content. The findings suggest that the catalyst for this dichotomy often hinges on the sociotechnical dynamics ingrained within platform governance, content moderation policies, and their implementations. Therefore, the question does more than merely punctuate our discussion. Fundamentally, this question accentuates the necessity to critically interrogate the systems of governance shaping these digital terrains, thereby influencing their inclusivity, accessibility, and resultant impacts on societal norms and values. This query is not just rhetorical but serves as a catalyst for introspective exploration of the beneficiaries and potential victims of content governance.

If the shared objective of governing sexual content on platforms is to ensure user safety and appropriateness across varied demographics, then the critical assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of such governance becomes non-negotiable. Unraveling who benefits and who stands marginalized could disclose insights instrumental in navigating towards a more equitable platform governance, sparking indispensable debates and shaping inclusive platform policies. Consequently, these inquiries pave the way for future research, inciting an essential dialogue within the political science and platform politics disciplines. As such, it is crucial for subsequent research in this field to contemplate the potential repercussions of restricting and censoring sexual information and communications, as well as the disproportionate impact this may inflict on marginalized communities. This emphasis provides an enlightening perspective on the latent power dynamics inherent in the system of platform governance.

Understanding the intricate relationships between technology, sex, power, and governance will be critical in shaping the future landscape of digital platforms, fostering more inclusive and empowering environments for sexual content creators, and advancing societal conversations around sexuality. As we look forward to the future of research in this domain, it becomes evident that there is a need for an intersectional, multidisciplinary approach. Researchers must continue to investigate how the interplay between technology, power, and sexuality shapes the lived experiences of creators, as well as the broader societal discourse on sexuality. By doing so, we can contribute to the development of more inclusive and empowering digital spaces and further societal understanding of sexual diversity, ultimately guiding the

evolution of digital platforms towards a future that respects and values diverse expressions of sexuality. It is my hope that this dissertation serves as a steppingstone towards this end.

In closing this dissertation, it is important for the researcher to emphasise a noteworthy insight derived from the outcomes of this research—the unwavering determination and resilience exhibited by creators of sexual content in the midst of a multitude of challenges. Their creative endeavors persist despite the pervasive influence of automated content distribution and moderation algorithms, and seemingly impossible navigating the intricate labyrinth of ever-changing and unevenly enforced platform rules and guidelines. They are subject to the critical gaze of human moderators, commercial intermediaries, and their peers, whose reports and flags bear considerable weight on their output. The repercussions of this relentless struggle can be profound, leading to the curtailment or suppression of their creative expression and, in severe instances, the obliteration of their digital presence. These extend beyond the individual, resonating within the interlinked communities of sexual content creators on TikTok and analogous platforms. The systemic pattern of exclusion further intensifies the marginalization of those daring to venture into the domains of sexual expression. Yet, in the face of these adversities, sexual content creators continue to reshape the contours of power, governance, and agency within the platform's landscape.

Investigating how sexual content creators perceive, respond to, and navigate their digital ecosystems, this dissertation has contributed to the ongoing illumination of the overarching power and governance dynamics shaping users' experiences, behaviors, and comprehension, thus contributing valuable insights into the ever-evolving field of platform governance and content moderation. The dissertation engaged with a broad spectrum of scholarship and empirical data that penetrated the wider notions of platformization, algorithmic power, deplatforming and deplatformization, corporeal politics, and the deplatformization of sex within digital contexts. Through this engagement, the dissertation has elucidated the theoretical frameworks and historical trajectories that enrich our understanding of the power dynamics and governance structures molding the digital experiences of individuals and communities affected by the platformization and deplatformization of sex.

As a closing reflection, it is imperative that the dissertation acknowledge the significant, yet often overlooked, role that these persistent sexual content creators play in challenging and redefining the dynamics of visibility politics on digital platforms. Without these creators pushing back on the often-unfettered power of platforms to control and dictate content boundaries, we might remain unaware of the underlying tensions and nuances of content moderation and its impact on diverse digital voices. Their consistent efforts and resilience illuminate the broader struggles of content creators, serving as a beacon for all those who find themselves marginalized or silenced within the vast digital realm. By navigating and negotiating the intricate web of platform policies, these creators not only elevate their own narratives but also foster critical discourse on the balance between platform governance and user agency.

Despite the evident power imbalance, these creators persevere, symbolizing resistance against the increasing tendencies of exclusion and erasure steered by platform politics and governance. They aren't merely on the receiving end of platform policies but are proactively working to establish their own presence, thereby influencing the governance of the digital arena. They are at the vanguard, advocating for a more inclusive representation, questioning for whom these platforms truly cater. Their daily endeavors – resisting systemic biases and advocating for a broader acceptance of sexual expression – are a testament to their unwavering resilience. Their collective experiences and performances, forming a community network of sexual content, acts as a call for inclusivity in platform politics and a more equitable distribution of power in platform governance. In the end, their narratives emphasize the adaptability and fluidity of our digital identities, suggesting that the future of digital spaces is malleable, with its course shaped by those determined to envision and work toward a more inclusive alternative trajectory.

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