Racism in the Platformized Cultural Industries: Precarity, Visibility, and Harassment in Canada

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Platform-dependent creative labor has been discussed widely in terms of the economic precarity inherent to the industry and the arbitrary ways in which algorithms structure and reinforce that precarity. I expand on these debates to articulate the role of systemic racism in structuring differential outcomes for racialized content creators by analyzing data from open-ended survey answers (N = 64), and semistructured interviews (N = 12) with racialized content creators in Canada to explore their perceptions of and experiences with platform-mediated racism. Their accounts indicate a shared understanding of how racism operates within the platformized cultural industries—be it through negative material outcomes, adverse experiences with platform algorithms, and/or through experiences of harassment. Drawing on theories of racial capitalism, institutional racism, and algorithmic bias, I provide an analysis that underscores how racism presents in multilateral, dynamic, and simultaneous ways, which compounds negative material and epistemic outcomes for racialized creators in Canada.

Keywords: platformized labor, digital inequality, influencer cultures, racism

In July 2021, Black creators on TikTok organized a content creation strike in response to appropriation of their culture and the exploitation of their creative work. Prostrike videos went viral, amassing hundreds of thousands of engagements (Lorenz & Zornosa, 2021). This protest was triggered by a specific issue: dance trends initiated by Black creators gained significant attention only when performed by white creators, often without crediting the original innovators (Mendez, 2022).[2] The heart of the matter lay in algorithmic visibility and racism, as a perception exists that only a select group of white TikTok stars could gain visibility and monetize their content. The strike's virality quickly diminished, but its question persisted: How does racism occur and operate within social media networks?

There has been much theorization about how racialized individuals experience the platformized cultural industries in inequitable ways; however, there remains a substantive and theoretical gap in our

[2] The use of lowercase "white" is a deliberate choice reflecting the critical race theories I employ throughout this article.

understanding of the effects of racism on the labor of racialized creators, specifically when looking at how everyday experiences of racism structure differential outcomes (Bliuc, Faulkner, Jakubowicz, & McGarty, 2018). Engagement with critical race perspectives that interrogate the role of white supremacy in perpetuating racist systems has been underexplored (Hamilton, 2020; Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021). Research germane to this area has been a dynamic field of scholarly inquiry, with particular attention paid to the precarity and instability cultural workers face (Hund, 2023; Poell, Nieborg, & Duffy, 2021), the algorithmic systems that structure these social interactions (Bishop, 2019; Cotter, 2019; Savolainen, 2022), and the relationship between algorithmic visibility and online harassment—especially among members of marginalized groups (Uttarapong, Cai, & Wohn, 2021; Vitak, Chadha, Steiner, & Ashtorab, 2017).

Building on this research, I show how racialized content creators in Canada experience racism in multilateral and simultaneous ways. I consider their experiences of racism in three distinct analytical frames: racial capitalism, algorithmic racism, and online harassment as facilitated by platform neutrality. This article offers a critical contribution for understanding the dynamic and manifold barriers racism creates for racialized content creators: racism emerges from different aspects of creators' labor and works laterally and simultaneously to produce barriers that limit creators' abilities to materially gain, build meaningful narratives of belonging, and feel safe within these environments. These barriers manifest through encounters with the platformized cultural industry at large, with algorithmic systems and through interpersonal interactions. I argue that these experiences expose racialized creators to compounded negative material and epistemic outcomes and thus hinder their abilities to participate in the platformized cultural industries in democratic, inclusive ways. To gain these insights, I employed a combined methodological approach using open-ended survey answers (N = 64) and in-depth semistructured interviews (N = 12) with Canadian racialized content creators. I contextualize my findings by reflecting on the available literature and identifying key modes in which racism produces differential outcomes for racialized creators.

In exploring experiences of racism among content creators, it remains important to reflect on how my social location shapes my scholarly inquiry. As a racialized, cisgender, heterosexual woman, I situate my analysis within the epistemological position that race is a contingent and contextual *process*. This process allows some races to appear invisible, while others to be salient. Race is made and remade through individuals' interactions with the social world, which affects how racialized individuals understand, make sense of, and act on the world. Thus, while acknowledging "whiteness" is also a form of racialization, I refer to the participants in the study as *racialized creators* throughout the article. This is a critical decision that highlights how "Otherness" is produced through racial difference, where one race's dominance renders other races as inferior. This conceptual distinction centers how racism acts on individuals' lives and underscores the importance of identifying racism and its cognate processes of difference-making as key drivers in the creation of social inequality.

Precarity, Instability, and Racism

Work in the platformized cultural industries has been discussed in terms of the precarity and instability cultural workers are exposed to vis-à-vis platform economic development. The industry is characterized by its increasingly platform-dependent environment where creators' objectives are heavily impacted by platform logics and where competition is high (Cutolo & Kenney, 2021; Poell et al., 2021). This is because of two factors: first,

the costs of creation—such as recording videos or music—have decreased substantially, which lowers financial barriers to enter the market. Second, there is virtually uncapped revenue potential in the cultural sector, where some "stars" are able to catalyze their visibility into lucrative deals (Brown, 2022). This entices cultural producers, who flock to the platforms in hopes of monetizing their content. Indeed, some research finds that in traditional entertainment markets dominated by closed-door networks, like India, creators prefer to engage with the precarious labor that social media networks offer (Mehta, 2019).

Duffy (2020) defines this "algorithmic precarity," which captures how workers structure their efforts in anticipation of algorithmic changes, as their livelihoods depend on their adaptation to the platform's algorithmic logics. This form of labor precarity is experienced uniformly across market participants. Glatt's (2021) study of creators in London and Los Angeles found platformized creators are exposed to escalated labor precarity, where "the responsibility for managing precarity sits squarely on the shoulder of individual creators" (p. 3865), who must continuously produce content across several platforms. Although asymmetries in the distribution of economic gains are widespread, it has been theorized they are more discernible across marginalized axes of identity like race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, and age (Hund, 2023; Poell et al., 2021).

Looking specifically at race and political economy, McMillan Cottom (2020) argues platforms have inaugurated ascendant forms of exploitative social relations, which are structured to support racial capitalism. Racism casts certain populations to the margins to maintain social stratification that supports capital accumulation (Bhattacharyya, 2018). In digital settings, platforms act as intermediaries, intervening into social life by hosting and structuring social relations. One of the ways in which these interventions support racial capitalism is what McMillan Cottom (2020) terms "predatory inclusion," which describes "the logic, organization, and technique of including marginalized consumer-citizens into ostensibly democratizing mobility schemes on extractive terms" (p. 3). This is done through increasing precarity for racialized workers by shifting the risk of employment from organizations to employees. This extractive logic operates toward gender as well, as content creation work relies on relationship building and invisible affective labor, which are domains traditionally associated with women (Lukács, 2020).

Racial capitalism adds a layer of risk for racialized creators, who engage in mitigation strategies to ensure their self-branding aligns with normative expectations of cultural work (Pitcan, Marwick, & Boyd, 2018; Sobande, Hesmondhalgh, & Saha, 2023) while knowing they are undervalued and underpaid (Christin & Lu, 2023). Precarity is further exacerbated along geographic lines, with creators from peripheral cultures like India, Ireland, and Turkey finding themselves with fewer opportunities (Bidav & Mehta, 2024). Mitigation strategies by these creators are a form of predatory inclusion, where racialized content creators engage with the influencer economy knowing their identities and practices are devalued and are forced to change to succeed. These strategies help racialized creators in the short term, at the cost of fragmenting worker collectives through tokenistic and individualistic labor conditions that preclude workers from coalescing around shared struggles (Christin & Lu, 2023).

Algorithmic (In)Visibility and Racism

Visibility has become a key measure of online success (Abidin, 2016). Visibility is considered a desirable output of sociotechnical practices, where algorithms dictate what content is valuable and promote

specified practices of digital engagement (Savolainen, 2022). Algorithmic visibility affords power within normative parameters of what is deemed appropriate and desirable. Visibility is not only about being seen "but actually being seen on *specific terms*: reaching the 'correct' visibility, one that will deliver desired outcomes" (Jiménez-Martínez & Edwards, 2023, p. 17; emphasis in original). Visibility is therefore also a form of social risk, as not meeting these normative parameters can be met with invisibility or harassment.

Data-driven metrics have reconfigured how cultural workers engage in their work. Creators engage in various strategies with the aim of boosting their performance metrics (likes, follows, reactions, views), which drives their algorithmic positioning. Because of the "black-boxed" nature of algorithms, creators implement various strategies and "folk theories" to understand and exploit algorithms (Cotter, 2019). Although these strategies are sometimes successful, platforms regulate and punish their use, with some creators reporting arbitrary and unevenly applied punishments toward those who do not fit within normative ideals (Duffy & Meisner, 2022).

In large part, generating visibility involves crafting a normative self-image that is authentic yet relatable to audiences (Hund, 2023). Production of these normative self-images is reflective of broader structures of social inequality (Duguay, 2019), where social inequality and white supremacy are entrenched through cultural production and amplification of white media stars (Boffone, 2022). Thus, visibility is an uncontrollable process whereby an actor's self-presentation practices and social identity play an important part in driving visibility.

Online Harassment and Racism

Hegemonic visual practices on platforms are often enforced through harassment and intimidation. Vitak et al. (2017) define online harassment as "intentional behavior aimed at harming another person or persons through computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices, and perceived as aversive by the victim" (p. 1231). Online harassment includes negative language, insults, doxing, impersonation, public shaming, and cyberstalking (Uttarapong et al., 2021). Harassment is facilitated by processes of algorithmic amplification, where platform affordances enable the rapid spread of negative posts (Gillespie, 2022; Matamoros-Fernández, 2017). Harassment is widespread among social media platforms (Marwick, 2021; Thach, Mayworm, Delmonaco, & Haimson, 2022), and a distinct stream of the scholarship has focused on both the higher rates of harassment toward members of gendered and marginalized identities (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021; Vitak et al., 2017), and on misogynistic harassment (Lawson, 2018; Mortensen, 2018; Sobieraj, 2020).

Sobieraj's (2020) analysis of gender-based online harassment among journalists of various races identifies how digital attacks are a form of power that maintain systems of exclusion and oppression. These attacks are identity-based: They are often impersonal and focus on the targets' physical attributes—particularly toward their racialized physiological traits and/or sexual desirability. Sobieraj (2020) identifies this as a rejection of individual actors as *representatives* of specific groups. Thus, online harassment is wielded as a form of patterned resistance to ideas and identities to perceived social threats, be it gender, race, sexuality, ability, age, and others. This form of backlash against threats to the status quo is evident when observing the treatment of Black women in visual and digital culture. Bailey (2016) terms this as

"misogynoir," which explains how anti-Black racism and misogyny are coconstituted in the media and through negative representations that precipitate racist gendered violence. In this way, sexism and racism intertwine to produce compounding effects.

Marwick (2021) argues this behavior has a moral function: networked harassment occurs when *any* form of morality is transgressed; this form of social shaming happens across ideological boundaries, such as left-leaning, nonpolitical, and right-leaning groups. Similarly, Lee and Abidin's (2021) case study of South Korean influencers who were "cancelled" by followers because of nondisclosure of sponsorship agreements finds that "cancellations"—whereby followers launch negative networked campaigns against those being cancelled—is a weapon used by those in low positions of power vis-à-vis networked relationships. Individuals attempt to enforce their morals and reclaim social power through networked campaigns to deprive influencers of their reputation, visibility, and monetization opportunities. However, these forms of networked power call on abusive tones that rely on and reinforce misogyny (Lee & Abidin, 2021).

Consequences of Online Harassment & Racism

Online harassment has been explored as a dimension of digital social inequality, insofar as it functions as a way for dominant groups to maintain control of public, communal spaces (Citron, 2014; Mantilla, 2015). Oppressed groups commonly respond by limiting their presence and changing their behaviors as a means of limiting harassment.

The consequences of online harassment are exacerbated by platform affordances and policies (Gillespie, 2022; Matamoros-Fernández, 2017), where sociotechnical environments result in algorithmic cultures that favor dominant forms of sociality. Algorithms and the cultures they sustain evoke feelings; these feelings may support dominant ways of seeing and being that are experienced as *sensed* realities (Ruckenstein, 2023). Ruckenstein (2023) describes how negative encounters—like receiving targeted ads after a seemingly private conversation with a friend—shape an individual's understanding of what algorithms can and cannot do. These perceptions may not accurately represent the technological and governance-based limitations of algorithms and supporting technologies. However, because of the opacity of the algorithmic environment, perceptions and stories become folklore, which is then treated as fact. This in turn shapes an individual's reality, which gets cemented through repeated encounters that solidify one's beliefs.

Applying an intersectional lens, it is crucial we theorize how these algorithmically mediated, sensed realities support dominant ways of seeing and being by fostering interactions that make some feel at home, and others feel uncomfortable, exposed, and as objects of hostility (Ahmed, 2007). We can see how—through repetition—online harassment, racism, and misogyny become embedded as part of the algorithms and their attendant cultures.

When looking at how harassment and trolling are managed, Coghill's (2024) study finds Black women engage in various harm-reduction tactics that allow them to remain in control of their social media accounts. Some tactics leverage user-led platform affordances like blocking or reporting accounts, selectively sharing information, and avoiding interacting with content intended to provoke anger. However, these strategies rely on individuals to implement them, which can cause anger, frustration, and hopelessness

in response to witnessing and experiencing harassment. It is important to note these spaces can provide opportunities for resilience and agency and can be transformed into networks that foster building community and solidarity among individuals facing oppression, such as community building in the Black diaspora in Britain (Sobande, 2020), or knowledge production of counternarratives to mainstream media (Peterson-Salahuddin, 2022).

These examples demonstrate how success in platformized cultural industries appears to be supported by structural systems that uphold and reify inequality and oppression. Although there is much theorization about how marginalized content creators face differential outcomes because of social oppression, the specific effects on the labor of racialized creators have been underexplored, and most existing research is situated in the United States (Bliuc et al., 2018; Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021; Ortiz, 2019, 2023). This article contributes to the empirical work on the experiences of racialized creators, specifically in the Canadian context.

Methods

This study draws data from two sources as part of a broader project exploring Canadian content creators' experiences: open-ended survey responses and interviews. Instagram was chosen as the primary access point to Canadian content creators because of its prevalence as a marketing hub for brand collaborations (Dopson, 2023). Despite the sampling strategy's focus on Instagram, this study is platform-agnostic. Content creators leverage multiple platforms in the execution of their work (Hund, 2023) and tailor content for the affordances and algorithmic cultures of each platform—often revising and reposting content across platforms (Su & Valdovinos Kaye, 2023). Thus, it seeks to understand how racialized creators experience racism across the social media landscapes in which they work and the specific ways platforms reinforce social inequality.

According to Statistics Canada, in 2023, 927,000 Canadians engaged in some form of platform-dependent gig work, which represents approximately 3.3% of the total Canadian population (Hardy, 2024). Platform-dependent gig work is distinct from other forms of self-employment in that the worker lacks control over key aspects of their operations (i.e., working hours, tasks), pricing, and a disproportionate dependency on specific software tools (Hardy, 2024). Given the rapid growth in this industry, it has become imperative that working conditions in the sector are investigated and understood.

The survey—focusing on Instagram creators in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver—drew a sample via Crowdtangle, tracking posts indexed under the six top regional hashtags. Public data were collected in quarterly segments from September 2021 to August 2022. Inclusion criteria for the survey were: accounts with over 2,000 followers, personal rather than business accounts, and a publicly available associated e-mail. This process identified 650 accounts, yielding an 18% response rate (N = 113).

Survey participants were asked about their race/ethnicity, and those who identified as nonwhite (n = 52) were asked a series of questions about their experiences of racism. See Table 1 for the demographic breakdown of racialized participants. Respondents reported using various forms of social media to carry out their work besides Instagram, with the most popular additional platform being TikTok (59.6%). Other

platforms used were YouTube, Facebook, personal blogs, Pinterest, Twitter, and LinkedIn. This study analyzes 64 open-ended responses to two open-ended questions: (1) How have racist experiences affected your work as a content creator? and (2) How can social media platforms support you better at dealing with racist comments, messages, or online postings?

Interview participants were recruited from the survey and through snowball sampling (see Table 2). At the end of the survey, self-identified racialized participants were asked whether they were interested in being interviewed. Those who responded "yes" were contacted, of which nine agreed to interviews. These participants provided referrals to other potential interviewees who may be interested in participating, of which three agreed.

Table 1. Survey Participants who Self-identify as Racialized.

	Participants	
	n	%
Geographic Location		
British Columbia	8	15.38
Ontario	39	75.00
Other provinces	5	9.62
Gender		
Female	45	88.24
Male	5	9.80
Nonbinary	1	1.96
Age		
20–29	26	53.06
30–39	13	26.53
40 and over	10	20.41
Education		
High school	6	11.54
Some postsecondary	7	13.46
Bachelor's degree	33	63.46
Graduate degree	6	11.54
Income (Before Tax)		
Less than $25,000	7	14.58
$25,000 to $49,000	9	18.75
$50,000 to $74,999	8	16.67
$75,000 to $99,999	7	14.58
$100,000 to $124,999	8	16.67
$125,000 or more	9	18.75

Note. n = 52, don't know/no response answers excluded from analysis.

Semistructured interviews (N = 12) were conducted between February and August 2022, lasting 30–70 minutes, and aimed to delve deeper into qualitative survey findings. The interview protocol focused on how participants experienced racism while working on social media platforms. Participants had diverse social backgrounds and an average content creation experience of six years (range: 3–12 years). Although all participants earned income from content creation, only two did it full-time. Followings ranged from 11,000 to 112,000 followers on Instagram. Participants used multiple platforms, including TikTok, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube, and Facebook. About gender, 75% identified as women, and the remaining participants identified as nonbinary or male. Participants' ages ranged from 23 to 44 and were located mainly in the Greater Toronto Area. All participants were racialized, with 50% identifying as Black, and the rest having diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds. Data presented are deidentified to ensure confidentiality, using respondent numbers for survey comments, pseudonyms for interviewees, and modified or omitted personally identifiable information.

Table 2. Interview Participants.

Pseudonym	Content Creation Genre	Gender
Bella	Lifestyle/travel	Nonbinary
Olivia	Travel	Woman
Sofia	Fashion	Woman
Maya	Wellness/Education	Woman
Nia	Fashion	Woman
Emma	Wellness	Nonbinary
Valentina	Lifestyle	Woman
Paula	Fashion/Beauty	Woman
Julia	Lifestyle	Woman
Veronica	Lifestyle/motherhood	Woman
Amir	Lifestyle/Men's Fashion	Man
Amara	Beauty	Woman

I carried out thematic analysis of the data in two phases: First, I read through and developed a draft codebook from the open-ended survey answers. Throughout this phase, I focused on identifying recurring patterns in the data to create internally consistent and externally heterogeneous categories. The draft codebook was used for the second phase of analysis, whereby I coded the interview data according to this codebook. After coding the interview data, I reviewed the patterns found, reevaluated and defined the codes, and produced mutually exclusive categories.

Results

Platformized Labor and Racism: Quotas, Tokenism, and Social Movements

Brand partnerships are vital for creators, yet racism influences opportunity volume and pay gaps between racialized and white creators. Brands often seek creators fitting a "mold" for mainstream appeal

and sometimes employ tokenism to appear diverse. Bella shared an example of taking part in such conversations:

> When I work with brands there's a lot of conversations where it's like, "we need a POC [person of color]." That's usually a conversation where it's like, "okay, we have three white girls, we need a POC. The optics don't look right." It's not like, let's get a diverse group, it's like, oh fuck! We don't have a POC.

Emma, Olivia, Valentina, Julia, and Veronica also experienced this form of tokenism; they were aware they were being considered for partnerships to meet diversity quotas. Although these practices did result in hiring racialized creators, participants described they felt the quotas limited the availability of work. Veronica, who had been working in social media for seven years, explained she had witnessed creators quitting this line of work because of these practices:

> The brand will have a line-up of 15 or 16 white influencers, and then they'll include one brown creator—say one South East Asian, one racially ambiguous woman—maybe a Latina—and they may include one Black woman. And that sucks because it's not diverse, it's not equitable, and it's not representative. A lot of Black bloggers and influencers have given up and have left the industry just for this sheer reason alone, and this happens all the time.

The 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, sparked by the killing of George Floyd by police, ignited discussions about racial equity (McLaughlin, 2020); in social media advertising, many creators called for more equitable hiring for commercial opportunities (Ilchi, 2020). Julia—who identifies as a Black woman—remarked on the increased opportunities:

> I did not see a lot of movement [on brand partnerships] until 2020. Fortunately, with the George Floyd situation, we're talking about treating Black people equally and I feel like a lot of opportunities came out of that. So for years I was making a little here and there, and I knew I should have been making more. On the other hand, other Caucasian individuals who had less numbers and were in the game less time than me were making a lot of money.

Some creators saw an increase in job opportunities, whereas others experienced a decline. Bella, who identifies as Asian, explained movements such as BLM show up as industry trends rather than transformations:

> As waves come and go, you'll notice more outreach and stuff. During BLM, there were more brands working with Black people. And the brands I was working with were like "we really need to work with Black people because of BLM." And then the whole thing with Asian Lives Matter happened, and brands were trying to book more Asians. So it's like a trend, and the way that you hedge against these trends is to keep your content as neutral as possible so that when there's not a trend on BLM or Asian Lives Matter, you can still go to work.

Paid opportunities also exhibited racial disparities. Interview and survey participants described being paid less than white counterparts or not paid at all. Survey respondent #97 commented:

> I've noticed less opportunities being offered to creators of African descent. Or when they are offered, we are told "there is no budget" for this campaign. However, our white counterparts with possibly less followers are getting paid for the campaigns. It can be very discouraging.

These experiences speak of the precarity and instability content creators experience day to day (Glatt, 2021). Racialized content creators see these conditions compounded, where success depends on their ability to present themselves neutrally while simultaneously mobilizing their racial/ethnic identities to fit with unofficial quotas. Sobande et al. (2023) work on self-branding of racialized identities speaks to this ambivalence, which highlights the intensified risk of lack of opportunities and increased competition as seen through the tokenism that creators describe. These findings provide qualitative insights into the ways racial capitalism fragments and commodifies individuals' identities. As Christin and Lu (2023) discuss, this works to erode identity-based commonalities between actors, turning them into forms of competition.

Visibility and Racism: Algorithmic Glass Ceilings and Racial Folk Theories

Because of their negative experiences with platforms and algorithms, racialized creators develop folk theories to explain their content's reach and monetization challenges. Participants often perceive a racial "glass ceiling." Survey respondent #34 described how their accounts interacted with the social media ecology:

> I have talked to two agents about metrics, and they have consistently said that white creators always get about 15 to 20% of their audience noticing their stories. Black creators get about 8 to 12%. Dark-colored [creators] get between 3 to 7% . . . This platform allows me to engage mostly with people of the same color as me, and some people who are not the same color as I rarely ever see my content, even though they have set up notifications for my account.

Maya described her experiences of racial segregation within the platform:

> I've experienced more—I want to say racial targeting, like being more targeted toward people of my race—so a lot of my followers would be Indian women and men. I think that's very interesting that the algorithm shows you more of your own race.

Amara, Maya, Nia, Emma, and Julia noticed comparatively less engagement on their content compared with similar accounts run by white creators, and generated theories to explain this. Paula shared observations of suppressed content during Black History Month, which were supported by communally shared knowledge:

I've heard from a lot of Black content creators during Black History Month. Our contents were supressed. And I'm like [. . .] why are all the Black people in February saying "oh, why are my views so low?" Why is it that when I use hashtags like #Blackgirlmagic my videos don't really get seen?

Participants also described folk theories about video composition and skin color that could explain their limited reach. Veronica describes: "There is this theory that if you are Black or of color, or if your house is dark, TikTok would push down your content, so your content had to be bright, or you'd have to be white."

Participants do not claim proof of these theories; regardless, the narratives reinforce perceptions that platforms are unwelcoming and marginalizing. Further, participants recognized that different platforms favor different content and interactions, with some appearing friendlier toward racialized creators. For instance, they described Instagram as promoting heavily edited, aesthetic, and aspirational content that streamlines content into "cookie-cutter" and dominant creative forms. Conversely, TikTok supports more authentic and free-flowing expression because of its short-video format favoring unedited content, but with serious moderation gaps that produced higher levels of harassment. Additionally, TikTok also censors content outside of mainstream content production, swiftly banning creators who appear to violate its guidelines on topics like sexuality, cannabis use, racial discussions, or politics. Meanwhile, some participants considered Pinterest the most inclusive platform, citing its policies and efforts to protect creators from harassment and allow for better development of identity-based communities.

These perceptions are supported by studies looking at algorithmic folk theorizations in response to opaque technological systems (Bishop, 2019; Savolainen, 2022). We can see how creators look at the whole platform ecosystem—its governance, outreach, affordances, and algorithmic interactions—to make sense of their experiences while working on specific platforms. These findings reveal an unexplored aspect of how racism mediates and structures the creation of folk theories, which in turn foster negative perceptions about belonging in these digital spaces, and the role of good governance and algorithmic practices in fostering anti-racism and inclusivity.

Online Harassment and Racism: Identity-Based Attacks, Threats, and Opportunities

Although creators' experiences differed, there was consensus on what they considered harassment—it encompasses unwanted, harmful behaviors, including insults based on race, gender, or other identity aspects, and unwanted pornographic messages. Not all harassment experienced was solely and/or overtly racist, but it did rely on identity-based remarks that reinforced dominant societal views. Valentina describes the nuanced nature of harassment:

On TikTok I talked about what it's like being in my 30s and not having children, that sets people off and they'll send me more intelligent hate. It's more "you're going to die alone, and you don't know what you're doing, you're a fool," that's it; it's not too bad. On YouTube a young Black woman called me a "flat booty transvestite" on my last video. So, [online harassment] is stuff that is totally unfounded like that.

Participants described receiving comments with prejudicial stereotypes, which included pejorative comments about their bodies or behaviors. Maya, who creates content about yoga, commented:

> People will just post a yoga video and if they're a person of color, you'll see the comments are different than for a white person; it's considered sexual content, it's just more sexualized for people of color . . . I have experienced [online harassment] in direct messages where people have messaged me saying things that were sexual.

In this case, Maya's social location as a racialized woman intersects, resulting in gendered and racist harassment. Other participants received comments insulting their bodies; Amara described experiencing harassment over the shape of her nose, and Julia recounted critique of her hair's texture. These findings were also reflected in the survey responses; survey respondent #99 described being told they should not be in front of the camera because they are dark-skinned. Encountering stereotypes and microaggressions structured participants' experiences, creating a hostile space where they did not feel they belonged.

Some participants received online harassment once per month or less, while others received it weekly. Participants reported being hyperaware of what they discuss and avoiding certain topics to avoid harassment. Amir discussed:

> In a way it [harassment] makes me more mindful of what I'm saying. I don't want to be taken out of context. Perhaps so sometimes I'd rather just keep it casual and keep it more fun and lighthearted, just because there can be misconceptions and misunderstandings.

Despite more than 80% of interview participants engaging in this form of self-censorship, whether they experience harassment is still not in their control. For example, there remains a chance their content would go viral, which precipitates an onslaught of harassment. Viral content did not necessarily contain controversial information; for instance, Sofia explained she received harassment from a viral video of herself visiting a billboard with her picture. Veronica described posting a video of washing vegetables in a way that reflects her culture's practices, which elicited thousands of negative comments:

> I don't know where all these people came up from, but it inspired them to just say all sorts of things. I was called all sorts of "n" words in the comments, "you're a Black bitch, I would never come and eat at a Black person's house, Black people are nasty and smelly, go wash up." It was all over my DMs. I had to take a good month off. After this video went viral, I told my husband—I never want to go viral again. It made me sick to my stomach.

Through these findings, we see harassment functions to enforce social order (i.e., posting videos with images of one's billboard may be seen as a disruption of hegemonic femininity, while washing vegetables differently may elicit backlash as a means of enforcing dominant cultural practices). However, an unexplored dimension of how online harassment and viral content coproduce each other is its impact on creators' reach. Participants explained most content is seen by their followers; however, viral content is exposed more broadly. This exposure helps creators grow their followings, but new viewers may misinterpret meanings, often resulting in harassment. Thus, viral events present a risk *and* an opportunity. Valentina

described a viral event that elicited a wave of online harassment, negative media coverage, and a sustained months-long harassment campaign, including death threats as well as e-mails to her employer calling for her termination. This event also led to gaining 25,000 new followers, positioning her to secure lucrative brand partnerships. She explains:

> It was awful. I wouldn't wish this on my worst enemy. But I would not take it back for the world. I was saving for about six months to quit my [full-time] job—I had started making so much money with my social media and I hated my job. Content creation just filled my heart, I love doing it and the harassment was the push I needed to quit my job and really focus on my passion. I am so much happier now that I've recovered, and I honestly don't want to kill myself anymore. I'm so glad that happened to me. I know that sounds disingenuous but I'm so glad that happened to me, because it just really set me on such a happier path.

These findings describe how participants reported harassment linked to identity-based aspects like gender, race, sexuality, religion, and politics, echoing findings that harassment is an impersonal response to perceived social threats (Sobieraj, 2020). Facilitated by algorithmic amplification (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017), viral events can both trigger harassment and boost creator visibility and monetization, illustrating how networked interactions enforce social norms and power dynamics.

Sociotechnical Push-Back: Reposts, Callouts, and Community Mobilizing

Participants reported actively managing harassment on their accounts by using a suite of features developed by platforms. Some of the tools used were deleting offensive material and blocking and/or reporting abusive accounts. The use of filters to automatically block derogatory comments was also popular. These strategies suppressed harassment but the onus on managing harassment fell to the participants. Amara explains:

> [These tools] are effective in terms of getting that one person to leave your page in the moment. However, it doesn't control future comments coming in, unless you put certain keywords, but like how many keywords are you going to filter right?

Participants used their visibility to manage harassment by subverting power dynamics. Sofia and Emma responded to harassing comments with "nice" replies or smiley faces, Nia left the comments up as a means of creating a "digital footprint" for the harassers, and Valentina and Olivia "reposted" and/or "pinned" the comments to show up at the top of the comment section. Olivia described this as a form of "calling out" harassers:

> Sometimes I'll leave gross comments up. I'm like, we'll let people see what you say, this is who you are. I've also pinned them before. [My followers] will respond to these comments, and often the harasser will delete the original comment.

Making harassing content visible through these strategies works as a way for creators to impose their own moral viewpoints and control how these comments are read. These responses also work to mobilize supporters, which in turn shames and harasses the individuals posting harassing content. Valentina explains:

> If [the harassers] are dumb enough to use an account where they can be found quite easily, I'll screenshot it and repost it. What's great is that my community has gotten so big that I don't have to deal with the online hate myself, my community will take care of the person and [the harassers] will end up deleting their nasty comments.

Last, participants developed various strategies to limit harm. Some participants, like Amara and Veronica, took weeks- or months-long breaks from their accounts, while others like Amir implemented strict boundaries:

> The way I use social media is, I have all my notifications off, so whenever I use the platform, I go into it, go through all the content, respond to everything, and then move along. I try not to spend too much time looking for something or getting sucked into it.

Although participants reported varied forms of moderation across platforms, the tools used relied on self-reports and reactive approaches to managing harassment. Not all platforms have the same moderation practices, but studies have identified that in cases of large-scale controversies, there is overreliance on machine learning and artificial intelligence (Gillespie et al., 2023). Smaller cases of harassment, such as the ones in this study, are understudied. The findings in this study suggest participants experience platform interventions as lacking, causing them to unduly take personal responsibility for these interactions. This shift in responsibility for managing harassment burdens creators, reinforcing racism and sexism in online cultures and increasing stress, potentially driving them away from online spaces.

Discussion: Compounding Effects for Racialized Creators

Precarity is a widespread phenomenon in the platformized cultural industries (Duffy, 2020; Duffy, Pinch, Sannon, & Sawey, 2021; Glatt, 2021; Poell et al., 2021), which explains how instability occurs alongside various dimensions of the platformized labor environment. These dimensions include the markets where labor exchanges happen, the industry that dictates the labor practices, and the sociotechnical environment within which these labor practices are hosted (Duffy et al., 2021). Within these dimensions, everyone engaged in creator labor faces precarity. In this study, I expand on this analysis to incorporate how social location, and in particular race, is also a determinant factor in how precarity is distributed unevenly among creators, and how racist market-based and sociotechnical practices create negative outcomes for racialized creators.

I find three risks to the labor of racialized content creators that make their experiences more likely to be negative or hostile. First, racial capitalism in the platformized cultural industries operates to fragment creators' identities and experiences by using these factors as exchangeable commodities in the labor market. Competition increases in this context, as the unofficial use of quotas to fill in racial or identity-based spots gives the illusion of scarcity. This works to atomize racialized creators' experiences and identities, which

may foster a lack of collaboration and community building (Christin & Lu, 2023). The participants' descriptions of the tokenistic labor practices they encounter and the ways in which they modify their behaviors to anticipate industry needs clearly demonstrate this.

Capitalism relies on racism to maintain inequality (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Melamed, 2015). Although social movements like Black Lives Matter disrupt these practices, industry change is volatile (Duffy, 2020; Duffy & Meisner, 2022). Social movements do not necessarily create more spaces; they simply change the order of priority when hiring for limited available spaces. As Melamed (2015) argues, a key feature of racial capitalism is disposability and unequal assignment of human value. The use of tokenistic practices to meet "diversity" quotas is representative of this form of racial capitalism, where it "deploys liberal and multicultural terms of inclusion to value and devalue forms of humanity differentially to fit the needs of reigning state-capital orders" (Melamed, 2015, p. 77). These practices are mediated through platformed events, which create trends and boost the "value" of certain races. Here we see how platforms encompass sociopolitical regimes that structure new organizational arrangements among owners and workers (McMillan Cottom, 2020); these arrangements rely on and reinforce social stratification and oppression in new, technologically mediated ways.

Second, I find algorithmic spaces become racialized to support dominant racial practices. This is done through the accumulation and sedimentation of racially coded experiences, which make some feel at home and others feel hostility and lack of belonging. The creators in this study reported experiencing several forms of algorithmic bias: through tacit observations of whose content is valued, visibility demotions, and the reproduction of theories that account for their invisibility. These findings are supported by research about algorithmic folk theorizations (Bishop, 2019; Savolainen, 2022). Narratives about algorithmic behavior elicit feelings about an individual's place in these systems. These feelings then shape how individuals conceptualize their role and belonging in these spaces (Ruckenstein, 2023). This study adds an intersectional lens and suggests that folk theorizations are contingent on social location—whereby race plays an important part in directing algorithmic engagements and outcomes. Through the circulation of these narratives, race structures the mode of operation and apprehension of algorithmic systems, where through the accumulation and sedimentation of experiences and practices, algorithmic spaces become imbued with racial qualities (Boffone, 2022). Ahmed (2007) describes this as the "institutionalization of whiteness," (p. 157), where institutions come to embody a project of racial domination through the repetition of actions made over time. In this way, folk theories of algorithmic racism function as a way in which dominant ideologies are reproduced as part of algorithmic systems. This works to further marginalize individuals whose participation in these spaces might be hindered by beliefs their work will be downranked, not made visible, or shadowbanned.

Finally, I identify how identity-based harassment, which is mediated through platform neutrality and individualistic self-reporting practices, upholds platform environments as hostile. Harassment is experienced widely online, with much work being done to identify how this phenomenon relies on misogyny and racism to operate (Bailey, 2016; Sobieraj, 2020; Uttarapong et al., 2021). In this study, all content creators reported experiencing online harassment, although the severity of experiences varied greatly. Creators reported experiencing a higher incidence of harassment when their work went viral. Although harassment is widespread in the industry, how it manifests reflects hegemonic beliefs and structural oppressions. This has two interrelated effects: first, marginalized populations receive more virulent forms

of harassment; and second, social stratification is reified as a means of maintaining social order. Further, it is important to highlight that platforms play an important role in both facilitating the spread of online harassment and fostering the beliefs and practices that make creators feel personally responsible for managing harassment against themselves. In this manner, through neutral governance strategies that emphasize self-reporting, platforms make it creators' responsibilities to manage harassment; and through focus on interpersonal resolution, harassment is tacitly conceptualized as an individual problem rather than a structural one that is facilitated and maintained by platforms.

All three of these risks operate in a dynamic way, either in tandem or discreetly. These risks foster affects and perceptions that reinforce negative understandings of algorithmic spaces and the role of racialized creators within them. This ultimately buttresses the notion that creators are individually responsible for managing their work environment. Given these environments are opaque and biased, managing harm becomes an impossible feat, rendering any risk mitigation practices reactive and limited. Despite this, racialized creators do exhibit various forms of agency to mitigate the risks they encounter, like retaliation, negotiation, or leveraging platform tools. However, these actions are largely individual and do little to address the broader systemic issues. Although they help creators maintain some control over their labor, they fail to drive the necessary structural change to create equitable environments. Thus, the struggle remains: individual efforts can offer temporary relief, but they are insufficient to transform these underlying biased systems.

Although this study focused specifically on the role of racism in creating differential outcomes for racialized creators, it is also important to theorize how other axes of identity also intersect to produce differential outcomes. This is a good starting point for theorizing how the labor of content creators is affected differentially because of discrete or simultaneous encounters with sexism, racism, ableism, and classism, among others.

Conclusion

In this article, I detailed how racialized content creators in Canada experience racism while doing their work. I highlighted the role of (1) racial capitalism, (2) racialization of algorithmic spaces, and (3) platform neutrality vis-à-vis harassment in creating barriers for racialized creators. This analysis underscored how racism presents in multilateral, dynamic, and simultaneous ways, compounding negative material and epistemic outcomes for racialized creators in Canada. Although these dimensions of online racism are not exhaustive, they elucidate the interlocking and multidimensional ways in which barriers compound to produce differential outcomes for racialized and white creators.

This article contributes to our knowledge of how racism mediates and structures differential outcomes for content creators, demonstrating racialized creators face compounded negative material and epistemic outcomes because of exacerbated precarity, algorithmic bias, and identity-based online harassment. Although these creators exhibit agency through retaliation, negotiation, and leveraging platform tools, their efforts are largely individual and insufficient to drive systemic change. This highlights a broader issue: individual actions, though crucial for immediate relief, cannot dismantle underlying biased algorithmic and market-based systems.

Further, this article makes two key theoretical contributions. First, it contributes to studies of algorithmic racism by displaying how platforms become imbued with racial qualities through the accumulation of negative experiences and meaning making. Through the accumulation and sedimentation of racist experiences, platforms come to embody projects of racial domination. Second, it contributes to studies of platformized labor by underscoring how online harassment has become a predominant risk of working on platforms and how creators engage in various strategies and behaviors to manage and capitalize on this risk. Thus, harassment becomes a perennial risk that contributes to the fragmentation of creators' labor by undermining their sense of safety and belonging. Although the scope of data collection limits these insights to a small group of content creators who identify as racialized and Canadian, the findings indicate a need for further inquiry to comprehend the widespread practices of tokenism in the industry, how algorithmic racism affects individuals' engagement with algorithmically mediated spaces, and how platforms can regulate and limit exposure to harmful working conditions.

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