*Research article*

Sexualities
2026, Vol. 0(0) 1–23


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DOI: 10.1177/13634607261449912
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# Clothed, blurred, exposed: Visual privacy and Filipino male sexual labour on X (Twitter)

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## Abstract

This article examines how Filipino male sex workers and content creators manage erotic visibility and safety through *visual privacy*: the aesthetic and affective labour of deciding what may be seen, hidden, or blurred. In a setting where both sex work and pornography remain criminalised and morally scrutinised, men who sell sexual content online must balance the economic value of exposure with the risks of recognisability, platform sanctions, and stigma. Drawing on visual culture, masculinity studies, and theories of contextual integrity, we analyse 100 publicly available posts from a larger corpus of 32,216 images across 55 high-follower Filipino creators on X (formerly Twitter). The study identifies three recurring modalities of visual privacy—*clothed*, *blurred*, and *exposed*— that translate postcolonial ideals of discretion and masculine respectability into strategies for platformed visibility. These practices reveal privacy not as withdrawal but as aesthetic governance: creators convert moral and algorithmic constraints into professional technique. By centring Global South masculinities, the article challenges Western narratives that equate sexual openness with liberation and reframes opacity and discretion as skilled modes of agency within digital sexual economies.

## Keywords

visual privacy, masculinity, sex work, X/Twitter, Philippines

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## Introduction

Digital platforms have reconfigured the conditions of sexual labour, transforming how sex is performed, represented, and governed. Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), OnlyFans, and Telegram enable creators to sell erotic content directly to audiences, collapsing the boundaries between intimacy, work, and publicity (Hardy, 2013; Jones, 2020). Yet the visibility that sustains livelihood also generates new forms of precarity. Algorithmic moderation, surveillance, and moral scrutiny converge to make sex work both newly accessible and persistently risky (Albury et al., 2017). Visibility thus becomes a paradox: a source of economic possibility that simultaneously exposes creators to policing, deplatforming, and shame. In these contexts, privacy cannot be reduced to secrecy or data control; instead, it denotes the ongoing negotiation of who may see what and under what conditions.

Recent research has begun to chart these negotiations from non-Western and postcolonial contexts, revealing how digital sexual labour is inflected by local moral orders, colonial legacies, and uneven economies. This builds on longer-standing analyses of Filipino male sex work as a visual and performative economy, particularly the gendered and aesthetic codes documented in studies of macho dancing and bar-based erotic labour (Pastor, 2025). Also, Labor's (2025) study of Filipino gay, bisexual, and transgender digital sex workers shows that creators operate within what he calls a "space between exploitation and empowerment." Within this space, workers mobilise platform affordances, kinship relations, and moral discourses to balance livelihood, discretion, and dignity. Rather than rejecting visibility, they practice what Labor terms strategic visibility, modulating self-presentation to navigate stigma and sustain economic participation. This perspective challenges universalist framings of digital sex work as either liberatory or exploitative, situating it instead within the affective and moral economies of postcolonial life.

The present study builds on this emerging scholarship by focusing on how these negotiations take shape visually. It introduces the concept of visual privacy to describe the aesthetic and affective labour through which Filipino male sex workers and content creators manage visibility and safety within overlapping regimes of law, platform governance, and moral regulation. Visual privacy extends Nissenbaum's (2004, 2011) theory of contextual integrity into the visual domain, understanding images not merely as representations but as practices of boundary management. Techniques such as clothing, blurring, cropping, watermarking, and the selective concealment of faces or environments function as dynamic tools that govern what bodies reveal, to whom, and with what risks. These compositional gestures are neither incidental nor merely protective; they constitute a form of aesthetic governance within algorithmic and moral systems that render certain kinds of bodies both hyper visible and punishable (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2018).

The Philippines offers a particularly revealing context for examining these dynamics. Sex work and pornography remain criminalised under penal and cybercrime statutes, yet digital erotic labour has flourished amid economic precarity, transnational migration, and global demand for sexualised Southeast Asian masculinities (Alcano, 2016; Hardy, 2013; Parmanand, 2019; Tadiar, 2021). Filipino creators operate within a moral economy shaped by *pagkalalaki*—a cultural code linking masculinity to composure, discretion, and

provision (Cañete, 2011; De Castro, 1995). In this article, pagkalalaki refers to a moral and social code of masculinity—composure, restraint, dignity, and avoidance of disgrace—not to heterosexual identity. This distinction is crucial: erotic performance may engage masculine respectability codes across diverse sexual subjectivities. We analyse how visual privacy techniques cite or rework masculine respectability without inferring creators' sexual orientation from content alone. Public erotic display risks feminisation and social disgrace, yet controlled visibility can signify discipline, fitness, and modernity. Digital sex work, therefore, becomes a site where *pagkalalaki* is not abandoned but rearticulated through the visual languages of professionalism, restraint, and desire. These dynamics provincialise Western assumptions that equate sexual openness with liberation and concealment with repression (Benedicto, 2014; Garcia, 2009).

Methodologically, this study departs from the narrative focus of existing ethnographies by analysing the visual compositions themselves. Through qualitative interpretation of 100 high-follower Filipino creators' posts on X, three recurring modalities of visual privacy are identified: clothed, blurred, and exposed. Each modality enacts a distinct calibration of discretion and desire. Clothed imagery performs respectability through disciplined sensuality; blurred imagery transforms anonymity into professionalism and erotic play; exposed imagery reclaims visibility as authenticity and ownership. Together, these modalities reveal privacy as a productive form of labour rather than its negation, a skilled practice that translates moral constraint and algorithmic precarity into aesthetic form.

This analysis is historically situated, examining posts circulated in November 2021 prior to subsequent shifts in X/Twitter's governance and moderation culture. The findings, therefore, describe how visual privacy was composed within a particular regime of algorithmic attention, monetisation, and moral scrutiny rather than offering a timeless account of Filipino digital sex work. At the same time, the modality framework advanced here is infrastructural rather than platform-bound. While specific affordances, such as verification systems, visibility metrics, and moderation practices, vary across platforms and over time, the underlying calibration between recognisability, erotic capital, and governance is likely to travel across digital sexual economies.

By situating Filipino male creators within these entangled moral, technological, and economic systems, this article contributes to broader debates on the politics of visibility in digital sexual economies. It demonstrates that opacity and discretion can function as active forms of agency and that the visual practices of Global South creators are shaped as much by colonial moral orders as by the logics of platform capitalism. Reframing privacy as labour foregrounds the creativity and discipline required to remain visible, desirable, and safe within economies that commodify exposure while punishing those who comply. This article makes three moves. First, it theorises visual privacy as a form of labour, shifting privacy from informational control to the compositional work of managing recognisability and circulation. Second, it shows how this labour is culturally mediated through Filipino masculinities and postcolonial moral economies. Third, it demonstrates how platform governance structures what can be shown, how it must be shown, and what must remain deliberately indistinct.

## Conceptual framework: Visual privacy, masculinity, and platformed sexual labour

Privacy has long been theorised through liberal frameworks that define it as an individual right to control access to personal information (Solove, 2008; Westin, 1967). Such models persist in data-protection discourse but obscure how privacy operates through embodied and visual practice (Lupton, 2016). Critical sociological theories have reframed privacy as relational and contextual (Goffman, 2002; Nissenbaum, 2004, 2011), while recent work has extended these ideas to the platformed circulation of personal data and labour (Masiero and Das, 2019; Pangrazio and Selwyn, 2019). Nissenbaum's (2004, 2011) notion of contextual integrity, where privacy violations occur when information flows breach contextual norms, offers a relational model but remains primarily data-centric. It does not account for how visibility itself is composed through framing, lighting, or gesture to remain legible yet safe.

Extending contextual integrity to the visual domain, this article conceptualises visual privacy as the aesthetic and affective labour through which Filipino male sex workers and content creators govern who may see what, and under what conditions. For creators whose livelihoods depend on visibility, privacy is not withdrawal from the gaze but a form of compositional governance: a repertoire of creative and moral techniques that calibrate exposure across regimes of law, kinship, and platform surveillance (Zuboff, 2019). Privacy, from this perspective, becomes the organising principle of visibility—the mechanism through which the body functions simultaneously as currency and as shield in digital economies of sex.

Debates over digital visibility have often reproduced a moral binary between empowerment and exploitation (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2009). Feminist and queer scholars argue instead that exposure can constitute both agency and vulnerability (Paasonen, 2021; Tiidenberg and Van der Nagel, 2020). Labor's (2025) ethnography extends this conversation by demonstrating that creators operate within a "space between exploitation and empowerment," developing strategic visibility to navigate stigma, economic precarity, and familial obligation. Visual privacy builds upon this insight by focusing not on narrative accounts but on the compositional work through which such strategies materialise. It reframes visibility as labour: the embodied, affective, and technical effort of modulating how the body circulates across publics and algorithms. Decisions about blurring, cropping, or watermarking become forms of aesthetic governance that link micro-level acts of image-making to macro-structures of moral and technological power.

This labour is both emotional and visual. Acts of concealment or revelation involve managing shame, pride, and fear—the affects that orient bodies toward or away from the gaze (Ahmed, 2014; Berlant, 2011). For Filipino creators, to blur or cover is not merely to hide but to perform dignity and control in the face of risk, converting anxiety into compositional skill. Following Foucault's (1977) analysis of disciplinary visibility and Deleuze's (1992) account of minor technologies of the self, privacy emerges as a repertoire of micro-practices that reassert authorship within systems that commodify and monitor sexualised images.

These dynamics unfold within a distinct postcolonial moral economy. Visibility and secrecy carry specific meanings in the Philippines, where *pagkalalaki* organises ideals of respectability (Cañete, 2011; De Castro, 1995; Pingol, 2001). Erotic display is frequently coded as effeminate or immoral, yet disciplined physicality, including controlled gestures and restrained humour, can signify diligence and virtue (Benedicto, 2014; Hanlon, 2012). Such ambivalences reflect the colonial layering of Catholic modesty, Spanish machismo, and American liberal modernity (Garcia, 2009; Tolentino, 2009). Within this order, discretion functions as moral self-management: a visible practice of responsibility rather than repression.

Digital platforms intensify these contradictions. Visibility is algorithmically rewarded yet remains morally suspect. Filipino creators must appear desirable without appearing indecent, translating restraint into professionalism. Their aesthetic decisions, like covering a face, softening lighting, and employing humour, render *pagkalalaki* in digital form and provincialise Western narratives that equate sexual openness with liberation (Attwood et al., 2018; Labor, 2025). From this vantage, opacity signifies virtue, not shame. As Tadiar (2021) argues, postcolonial subjects labour not only to survive but to make their virtue legible to global audiences. The creator's self-editing thus becomes an act of cultural translation between familial honour and transnational markets of desire.

Platform infrastructure further structures this aesthetic labour. Platforms such as X and OnlyFans commodify intimacy while governing its visibility through algorithmic moderation (Bishop, 2020; Gillespie, 2018). Exposure is therefore precarious, monetised yet censored. Navigating these thresholds requires algorithmic literacy: knowing how to remain visible enough to earn while compliant enough to avoid bans (Albury et al., 2017). Privacy management becomes integral to the labour process itself (Hardy, 2013; Jones, 2020). Each visual decision, like cropping, watermarking, and captioning, embodies a risk calculation under surveillance. Filipino creators face additional asymmetries because their visibility is mediated by Western-owned platforms whose "community standards" reproduce Eurocentric sexual moralities (Couldry and Mejias, 2018). Their images must satisfy both algorithmic norms and imagined expectations of foreign consumers, producing what Lasén and García (2015) describe as aesthetic governance: the internalisation of external control through style.

Foregrounding labour clarifies the economic and affective stakes of privacy. As Gill and Pratt (2008) and Hesmondhalgh (2021) observe, affective and creative work under neoliberalism relies on self-discipline and emotional attunement. For sex workers, these capacities are vital to survival. The labour of modesty, such as teasing rather than revealing, translates moral ambiguity into professionalism. Privacy thus becomes a marketable attribute, a visible marker of reliability and care. This extends feminist analyses of cultural and immaterial labour (De Peuter, 2014; Hardt and Negri, 2000), positioning digital sex work as a mode of aesthetic self-regulation within surveillance capitalism.

Centring Global South masculinities further challenges the universalism of visibility politics. Queer-of-colour and postcolonial theorists have shown that "coming into view" often reproduces racialised hierarchies of legibility (Ferguson, 2004; Puar, 2013). Filipino creators inhabit this paradox: hyper-visible as racialised fantasy yet politically invisible as workers in global erotic economies. Their strategic opacity enacts Glissant's (1997) "right to opacity," a refusal to be fully legible to systems of power. Humour, irony, and partial

concealment become survival tactics that enable participation in global markets without a full surrender to their visual grammars.

X/Twitter's architecture shapes how erotic labour is staged as promotion. Public follower metrics quantify desirability; retweets and quote-tweets amplify circulation beyond intended audiences; and recommendation systems reward engagement and novelty. At the same time, governance is experienced as anticipatory: creators speak of shadow bans, reach drops, and account instability. Visual privacy techniques cluster around recognisability management (cropping faces, masking, blur) and ownership signalling (watermarks, branding) in response to this dual dynamic of visibility and discipline.

From this perspective, visual privacy is not defensive withdrawal but a critical practice that materialises the entanglement of morality, technology, and labour. It illuminates how colonial disciplining of sexuality persists within algorithmic governance, where automated moderation reproduces the moral hierarchies of empire. To blur or watermark is thus to negotiate with the digital afterlife of colonial control. Taken together, these arguments position visual privacy as aesthetic governance that translates moral and technological constraint into compositional practice. It reframes privacy as embodied and affective rather than informational, provincialises Euro-American assumptions equating liberation with exposure, and redefines visibility as labour—a terrain where affect, risk, and virtue converge. In doing so, it contributes to Sexualities' growing body of scholarship on Global South digitalities (Chan, 2021; Labor, 2025), offering a grounded account of how Filipino men choreograph visibility as a means of survival within algorithmic and postcolonial orders.

## Methodology: Visual analysis, context, and reflexive positioning

This study adopted a qualitative visual analysis to explore how Filipino male sex workers and content creators negotiate erotic visibility and safety on X (formerly Twitter). The goal was not to measure frequency or content but to interpret how visual and textual cues function as forms of labour. These everyday aesthetic and affective practices manage risk, recognition, and income. The analysis treated images not as static artefacts but as communicative performances situated within overlapping moral, economic, and technological structures (Banks, 2018; Rose, 2015). The research is, therefore, grounded in an interpretivist, constructivist approach informed by visual sociology and feminist epistemology. It is assumed that meaning is produced through social and technological relations rather than inherent in the image itself (Haraway, 1988; Pink et al., 2016). This study does not claim to reconstruct creators' subjective intentions. Rather, it analyses how visual-textual compositions function within platformed and moral ecologies. Questions of interior meaning would require participatory or interview-based research beyond this study's scope. Following Rose's (2015) framework, images were analysed at three levels—composition, circulation, and audiencing, while also recognising that interpretation is shaped by the researcher's own cultural and affective location. This perspective aligns with critical sex-work scholarship that views representation as labour rather than pathology (Blunt and Wolf, 2020; Sanders, 2005).

## Sampling and corpus construction

Data were collected in November 2021 through purposive sampling of publicly visible accounts operated by Filipino men who self-identified as content creators or sex workers. Across 55 Filipino creator profiles meeting the 100,000 plus follower threshold, the total number of images posted in 2021 was 32,216. From this broader field, 1174 images were retained for the dissertation-stage corpus as relevant to privacy-oriented compositional practices. For this article, 100 posts were selected for close qualitative visual analysis. This staged reduction prioritised interpretability and ethical restraint while limiting inadvertent traceability.

Sampling targeted creators with more than 100,000 followers to capture those most exposed to the double bind of fame and risk, where algorithmic visibility produces both income and vulnerability. The focus on high-follower accounts is a case-selection strategy rather than a claim to represent Filipino digital sex work in full. Visibility thresholds shape risk: recognisability intensifies as audiences scale, and enforcement consequences become economically consequential. The corpus, therefore, captures high-stakes visual privacy techniques developed under amplified platform scrutiny. Search terms combined English and Filipino descriptors (e.g., "Pinoy," "macho," "alter," "SarapNgPinoy," "OnlyFans") to reflect the hybrid vernaculars of Filipino digital eroticism. The 100-post analytic sample was drawn across the 55 creator accounts rather than concentrated within a small subset. Selection prioritised cross-creator variation in concealment techniques, settings, paratext, and branding practices. The goal was to develop a modality-based model from recurrent visual logics rather than to infer statistical prevalence.

Each was examined in situ rather than downloaded, preserving platform context and reducing ethical and legal risks associated with explicit material. Captions, hashtags, emojis, and visible metadata were recorded to situate images within their immediate paratexts and intended audiences. While this non-extractive method limited the ability to perform large-scale coding, it ensured that creators' work was treated as intentional and situated rather than as "data" to be mined (Markham and Buchanan, 2012), and cohered with ethical concerns about the appropriation of sex workers' content, discussed below.

This approach acknowledges that automated scraping or random sampling would be neither methodologically sound nor ethically defensible. Algorithmic personalisation on social media means that no two users see identical content, and automated scraping can inadvertently breach consent and amplify harm (Hing et al., 2018; Lopez-Gonzalez and Griffiths, 2016). The interpretive strategy, therefore, mirrored naturalistic methods used in digital gambling and pornography studies, where corpus building occurs through ordinary use rather than extraction.

Analysis combined compositional interpretation with reflexive thematic coding (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Each image–caption pair served as a unit of analysis. Initial open coding identified recurrent "visual tokens" that mediate privacy and legibility, such as faces, tattoos, clothing, blurring, emoji overlays, watermarks, and cropping. These were clustered into conceptual groupings that captured different calibrations of visibility. Through iterative memoing and discussion between the authors, three recurring modalities of visual privacy emerged, each representing distinct strategies for balancing erotic capital and safety.

The process followed an abductive logic, moving between empirical detail and theoretical framing (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). Rather than seeking categorical saturation, the analysis aimed for conceptual stability, which was achieved well within the 100 selected for the sample, and we noted that we had reached the point at which new data illuminated rather than transformed the conceptual model (Dey, 1999). Conceptual stability was treated as reached when additional cases refined variation within the emerging model rather than generating new modality types. Attention was paid to both the visual structure and the moral or affective tone communicated through captions. This interpretive focus allowed the analysis to bridge aesthetic, cultural, and technological dimensions of privacy work.

## Ensuring rigour and reflexivity

Rigour was pursued through dialogical validation rather than mechanical reliability. The first author, familiar with Filipino digital cultures, conducted initial coding, informed by an insider understanding of idioms such as *hiya* (e.g., shame that promotes modesty and discourages behaviours or expressions that might bring dishonour to oneself or one's family) and *pagkalalaki*. The second author, located in the UK, conducted a critical review, questioning interpretive assumptions and drawing on feminist and criminological frameworks on sexual labour. These discussions generated productive tension, sharpening conceptual categories and minimising cultural overfamiliarity. Following Charmaz (2014) and Nencel (2014), disagreement was treated as a resource for reflexivity rather than an error to be resolved.

To mitigate the epistemological constraint of non-reproduction, compositional descriptions were independently reviewed by both authors and iteratively refined through cross-reading. Where interpretive disagreement emerged, images were revisited, and descriptive language narrowed to observable visual features (e.g., framing, lighting, occlusion) rather than inferred intention. Claims, therefore, rest on visible compositional properties rather than speculative interior motivations. Interpretive rigour was further enhanced through constant comparison across examples, detailed analytic memoing, and transparent documentation of analytic decisions. Triangulation was achieved not through multiple datasets but through multiple interpretive lenses, including insider cultural fluency, outsider critique, and theoretical iteration between privacy and masculinity frameworks.

## Ethical considerations

Working with sexualised digital material required continuous ethical reflection. The study followed the *Association of Internet Researchers' Guidelines 3.0* (Franzke et al., 2020), which emphasises contextual and relational ethics over rigid procedural rules. Only publicly accessible, self-published content was analysed, and no usernames, URLs, or identifiable features are reproduced. Images were paraphrased rather than reproduced, preventing traceability and mitigating the risk of non-consensual redistribution. Not reproducing images entails an epistemological trade-off. We address this by providing

granular compositional description, composite vignettes that synthesise recurring patterns, and grounding interpretation in creators' paratext where available.

Ethical responsibility was understood as an ongoing relational process rather than a one-time approval. Following Pink et al. (2016) and Haraway (1988), ethics were treated as iterative, embedded in every analytic decision, from corpus selection to the representation of creators as professionals rather than "subjects." This stance aligns with sex–worker–led research principles emphasising autonomy, consent, and harm reduction (Blunt and Wolf, 2020; Sanders et al., 2018). The analysis sought to contribute interpretive understanding rather than exposure, and to represent creators as agents navigating constrained choices within structural and moral orders.

The choice to focus on highly visible creators was ethically and analytically motivated. Public exposure is integral to digital sex work: visibility itself constitutes both occupational hazard and value. Analysing the work of prominent creators illuminated these dynamics without violating the privacy expectations of those operating in closed or encrypted settings. However, the analysis remained sensitive to contextual fluidity, specifically to the fact that "public" does not mean "free for analysis." As Ravn et al. (2020) caution, researchers must interpret visibility through the same contextual norms that participants inhabit. Each interpretive decision here, therefore, balanced analytic insight against respect for creators' self-presentation and dignity. In addition, we excluded any material that (a) suggested underage status or age ambiguity, (b) lacked clear adult self-identification by the account, (c) appeared to involve reposted "leaked" or private content, or (d) referenced minors in paratext. Where age was uncertain, we defaulted to exclusion. This precaution narrows the sample toward adult self-positioned creators but aligns with harm-reduction ethics.

By operationalising visual privacy as an analytic concept, the study contributes to visual sociology and digital sexuality research in three ways. First, it bridges micro-level analysis of aesthetic form with macro-level questions of governance, linking compositional techniques to moral and algorithmic constraints. Second, it foregrounds Global South perspectives, challenging the Eurocentrism of much digital ethnography by recognising non-Western moral economies as epistemically generative (Puar, 2013; Tadiar, 2021). Third, it models an ethical stance grounded in interpretive restraint, acknowledging that some knowledge, particularly about sexual labour, must remain deliberately blurred. Through this approach, the methodology mirrors its object: practising privacy as both an analytic method and ethical principle.

## Findings and analysis

Across the corpus, Filipino male creators continually calibrated visibility through three visual modalities: clothed, blurred, and/or exposed. Although presented as three modalities, clothed, blurred, and exposed are dominant orientations within dynamic assemblages of technique (see Figure 1). Creators routinely layer concealment and disclosure—e.g., exposed bodies paired with watermarking; clothed poses with face-cropping; blur combined with monetisation cues. Each represented a negotiation between erotic display, moral respectability, and platform governance, collectively illuminating

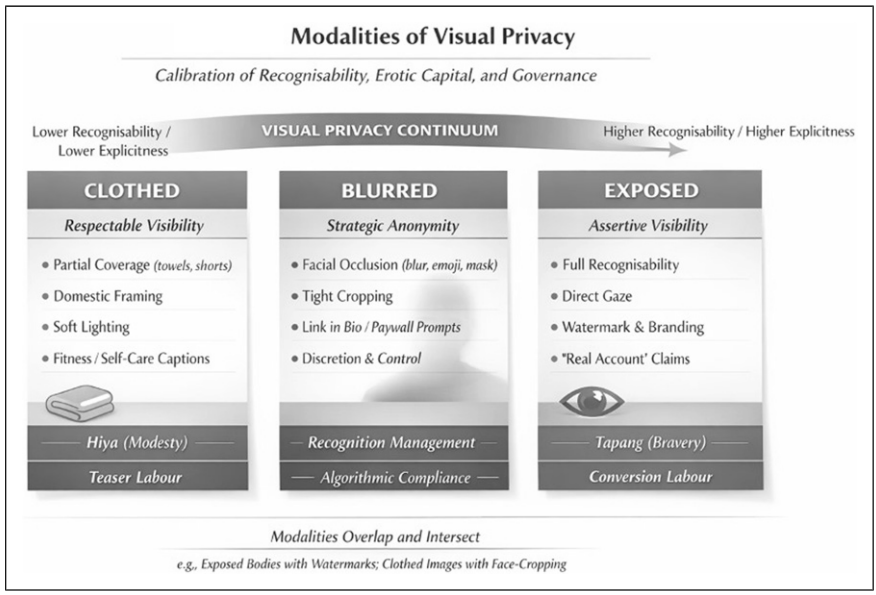


**Figure 1.** Modalities of visual privacy.

privacy as labour and as cultural strategy. These combinations are constitutive rather than exceptional features of visual privacy practice.

## *Clothed: Respectable visibility and the discipline of desire*

Across multiple accounts, the camera is positioned at chest or waist height, often facing a mirror or angled slightly downward. The face is partially cropped, turned away, covered by a towel edge, or obscured by hair or shadow. Lighting is soft and frontal, minimising harsh contrast and producing an even skin tone that emphasises musculature without full nudity. The body appears in gym shorts, towels, underwear, or partially unbuttoned clothing—coverage that sustains erotic legibility while signalling restraint. Domestic cues (bathroom tiles, bedroom mirrors, gym lockers) situate the body within everyday routine. Captions frequently frame the image through discipline ("post-gym," "after shower," "clean"), humour, or light flirtation, recoding erotic display as controlled self-presentation rather than reckless exposure.

Clothed imagery dominated the dataset, positioning eroticism within boundaries of propriety. Bodies appeared in towels, underwear, or athletic wear, with fabric delineating the threshold between what could be seen and what must remain concealed. Many creators used bathroom mirrors or bedroom corners as backdrops, adopting these spaces coded as private to reinforce the image as recognisably domestic. Lighting was soft and frontal, avoiding harsh shadows; bedsheets or tiled walls provided a neutral, middle-class air of respectability. Captions emphasised health, cleanliness, or humour: "gym check," "post-shower routine," "Monday motivation." Desire was recoded as disciplined self-care rather

than transgression, translating erotic display into moral and marketable composure. As Gill (2009) notes, this "controlled transparency" performs availability through restraint.

It was noted that this aesthetic draws on Filipino moral economies, in which masculinity is expressed through *hiya* (Cañete, 2011; De Castro, 1995). Containment operates as both an erotic and an ethical signal: to be nearly naked yet not indecent. Benedicto's (2014) ethnography of Manila nightlife identified similar "almostness" as a performance of classed respectability. Online, towels, gym shorts, or face masks function as moral props, as visual infrastructures of propriety that sustain curiosity while signalling virtue.

Face masks further recalibrated this tension. In numerous posts, surgical masks were retained even when the body was or was nearly nude. Their presence connoted pandemic hygiene and anonymity, serving as a socially sanctioned form of concealment that reframed modesty as a civic responsibility. The mask thus blurred medical, moral, and erotic registers, and privacy became a protective performance. Other forms of masking extended this repertoire. Black fabric masks, ski or balaclava-style coverings, and cartoon or animal masks appeared across posts, transforming anonymity into spectacle. Kink-inspired leather hoods and harness masks drew on global fetish iconography visible in Western gay pornography and cosplay aesthetics (Subero, 2010), while Halloween or superhero masks folded humour (Soriano and Cabanes, 2020) and parody into erotic display. These diverse coverings performed layered functions: concealing identity, signalling genre affiliation, and amplifying aesthetic control. Where the surgical mask communicated compliance and restraint, these stylised variants projected confidence and irony, showing that privacy could be theatrical rather than merely defensive, transforming anonymity into a visual language of wit and professionalism. Together, the proliferation of masks materialised the cultural and affective tensions of visibility itself. Each type offered a different calibration of moral distance and erotic presence, enabling creators to manage recognition while performing discretion, humour, and professional craft.

Indeed, clothed imagery also enacted professionalism. Calibrated combinations of pose, caption, and coverage exemplified Duguay's (2016) "context management," balancing visibility across publics like family, followers, and paying clients. Clean spaces, indirect gazes, and neutral colour palettes aligned with influencer aesthetics, rendering sexual labour indistinguishable from lifestyle branding. Such content circulated beyond sexual markets into broader influencer economies, where privacy itself became a mark of authenticity.

Economically, clothed images operated as teaser labour: free previews redirecting audiences toward subscription platforms—a form of "tiered intimacy" (Jones 2020). English or "Taglish" captions addressed both local and international markets; tasteful eroticism travelled globally yet affirmed Filipino modesty. As Tadiar (2021) observes, such performances insert the postcolonial body into global circuits of desire without surrendering cultural specificity. Containment is therefore labour: restraint converts modesty into affective capital with the promise of access.

## *Blurred: Strategic anonymity and the aesthetics of disappearance*

Not every visual feature reflects a fully articulated strategy. Some effects may emerge from constraint—low-cost devices, poor lighting, pandemic conditions. However, even

constraints can become incorporated into the aesthetic repertoire over time. Our claims focus on how techniques function within posts rather than reconstructing interior intention. In posts aligned with this modality, exposure increases, but recognisability is actively managed. The face may be pixelated, softened with a gradient blur, partially blocked by emoji overlays, masked by a shadow, or obscured by motion. Blur has texture: sometimes a deliberate digital block, sometimes a soft diffusion that signals post-production editing rather than camera failure. The body may be fully or partially nude, but facial traceability is interrupted. Captions and hashtags often stage partial access ("teaser," "no face," "DM," "link in bio"), positioning concealment as part of the erotic script and the monetisation pathway. The image invites desire while maintaining a controlled threshold of identity disclosure.

The blurred modality transformed concealment into value. Posts often displayed explicit nudity or sexual acts, yet obscured faces and identifying marks through careful editing. Some creators cropped images just below the eyes, used pixelation to dissolve detail, or dragged a digital brush across their faces to create hazy smears of colour. Others overlaid translucent stickers, streaks of lens flare, or rainbow filters that glowed faintly against brown skin. Occasionally, handheld cameras introduced natural blur from motion, the accidental jitter of breath or arousal. The result was a tactile visual dialectic of revelation and disappearance—a choreography of almost-seeing that echoed Barthes' (1975) "pleasure of the incomplete." In the Philippine context, however, anonymity reflects intensified stakes. Criminalisation and familial shame make recognisability dangerous (Parmanand, 2019; Voelkner, 2017). Blurring thus performs both protection and authorship, enacting Nissenbaum's (2004) contextual integrity: a calibration of who is allowed to see and what must remain opaque. The blurred face asserts control, transforming visibility into a privilege granted on the creator's terms. Concealment also intersects with aesthetic norms and fantasy. Cropping and shadowing can deflect face-based beauty standards while intensifying projection. Ambiguity sustains erotic imagination: the unseen face becomes a feature rather than a deficit.

Notably, technically, blurring and overlays also subverted automated moderation. Hashtags such as #SafeForTwitter or captions like "Full view—link in bio" signalled awareness of algorithmic policing and performed algorithmic compliance (Albury et al., 2017). Privacy became performative—a negotiation between human intention and machinic legibility.

However, culturally, concealment mediates tensions within *pagkalalaki*. Facial exposure risks feminisation and moral disgrace (De Castro, 1995; Pingol, 2001); the hidden face preserves dignity while displaying virility. Tattoos, musculature, and body hair replace expression as sites of identity. Followers interpret anonymity as discretion and reliability, or, as Sanders et al. (2018) describe, as trust-building boundary management. Indeed, alongside digital blurring, shadows, props, and emojis added layers of concealment. Some creators stood backlit by window light, so their features vanished in silhouette; others wore sunglasses, baseball caps, or pandemic face masks indoors. Laughing or winking emojis often replaced eyes or mouths, merging humour with self-defence and translating anxiety into camp. Soriano and Cabanes (2020) account of Filipino digital humour illuminates this affective hybridity: irony and play soften taboo, turning exposure into a joke that still conceals.

Emotionally, the blur embodies the labour of secrecy—the continual balancing of pride and fear. Captions such as "keeping this private" or "hope this stays up" reveal this tension between self-assertion and risk. What emerges, as observed across posts, is a desire to be known but not recognised. Blurring visualises that ambivalence: a postcolonial opacity through which Filipino men transform absence into authorship and concealment into craft (Glissant, 1997; Tadiar, 2021). These practices enable creators to survive—by which we mean navigating layered precarity: legal sanction and moral stigma, involuntary exposure to family or employers, and the risk of platform removal or shadow banning while monetising visibility.

## *Exposed: Visibility, sovereignty, and the politics of risk*

Here, the face is fully visible and oriented toward the camera, often with direct eye contact or a confident half-smile. Lighting is clearer and more deliberate, producing sharper facial detail. Posts frequently include watermarking, consistent branding, or explicit claims of authenticity ("main account," "real," verified badges where applicable). Rather than cropping away recognisability, the image asserts ownership over it. Exposure is framed as confidence and professionalism; captions often emphasise pride, self-assurance, or continuity of persona across posts. Visibility becomes not an accident but a declared stance.

The exposed modality marked the continuum's other pole. These posts featured unblurred faces and explicit acts, often watermarked with usernames or Filipino flags. Rather than vulnerability, exposure was framed as confidence and credibility. Captions proclaimed, "real account," "no shame," or "verified." Visibility itself became sovereignty—the right to appear on one's own terms. Such creators engaged what Gill (2009) calls an "ethics of authenticity": openness as moral virtue. For Filipino men, this authenticity is intertwined with *tapang* (bravery) and *tiwala sa sarili* (self-trust), local virtues of masculine strength (Cañete, 2011; De Castro, 1995). The direct gaze, frontal posture, and controlled lighting reasserted agency over representation. Rather than the voyeur's capture, the image declares, "I see myself seeing you."

Exposure, however, was rarely unguarded. Almost all explicit posts included watermarks, URLs, or disclaimers (like "consensual" or "my own video"). These devices counter piracy and assert ownership, echoing Abidin's (2015) "micro-celebrity professionalisation." The creator's face doubles as a trademark, converting vulnerability into intellectual property. Yet, as Gillespie (2018) notes, platforms retain ultimate authority over visibility: accounts are suspended, content is deleted, and algorithms are demoted. The watermark thus symbolises aspirational control within dependency—a fragile sovereignty under platform capitalism.

Some creators used exposure politically. Hashtags such as #SexWorkIsWork, #PinoyPride, or #AlterPH signalled alignment with global sex-worker movements (Blunt and Wolf, 2020). For them, visibility was collective advocacy, a declaration that Filipino male sex workers exist and deserve rights. Still, the cost of such assertion remains high under laws criminalising both pornography and sex work (Parmanand, 2019; Voelkner, 2017). Exposure thus performs a contradictory politics, both resistance and precarity.

Economically, exposed content served as conversion labour: free explicit clips driving traffic to paid channels. Full exposure was not unbounded openness but commodified privilege, with access segmented by price, risk, and trust (Jones, 2020; Van Doorn and Velthuis, 2018). Even total nudity required contextual curation: creators timed uploads to low-moderation hours, used ephemeral stories, or warned followers "might delete later." The phrase "might delete later" operates as both a vernacular and an economic technique. It signals risk while manufacturing scarcity, intensifying engagement, and directing audiences toward subscription channels. Such tactical transparency exemplifies algorithmic legibility management ((Albury et al., 2017). Openness itself demands work, anticipating bans, managing shame, and balancing morality with monetisation. Affectively, exposure completes the continuum from modest discretion to assertive pride. It embodies Berlant's (2011) "cruel optimism": the hope that visibility will yield freedom despite its hazards. For these men, to appear is to survive, to claim authorship within systems that commodify and police their bodies. Yet sovereignty remains contingent, resting on fragile infrastructures and moral negotiation.

## Discussion and conclusion: Privacy as labour, visibility as governance

Across the three modalities, this study has examined how Filipino male sex workers and digital content creators negotiate contradictory demands of erotic visibility and moral respectability. Through the concept of visual privacy, the analysis has traced how these creators transform the pressures of criminalisation, familial surveillance, and platform governance into compositional techniques that sustain income, safety, and dignity. Privacy here is not the negation of visibility but its continual reorganisation: a form of labour through which the self is made governable, professional, and saleable within global erotic economies. Framing visual privacy as labour does not imply purely instrumental calculation. Posts often carry play, camp humour, and aesthetic experimentation. Concealment can be witty and theatrical as well as protective.

This argument advances recent Southeast Asian scholarship, especially Labor's (2025) ethnography of gay, bisexual, and transgender sex workers in the Philippines, which identifies digital sex work as a "space between exploitation and empowerment". His respondents describe strategic visibility as a mode of livelihood that balances shame, survival, and aspiration under intersecting regimes of stigma and platform control. Building on these insights, this analysis moves beyond narrative accounts of self-presentation to the compositional and aesthetic practices through which strategic visibility is enacted. Visual privacy reveals how discretion, opacity, and humour become forms of craft, as techniques through which Filipino men translate moral and technological constraint into visual style.

This reconceptualisation departs from the dominant binary in digital sexualities research that situates visibility between emancipation and repression (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2009; Paasonen, 2021). Instead, visibility is read as a site of moral and affective labour shaped by colonial histories and platform infrastructures. The work of being seen, whether through partial coverage, pixelation, or watermarking, entails not only aesthetic effort but emotional calibration: the conversion of shame, pride, and aspiration into

compositional decision. These practices reconfigure what Ahmed (2014) calls the "stickiness" of affect, showing how emotions adhere to surfaces such as the towel, the blur, or the skin and are redistributed through digital craft. Labor's (2025) interviewees likewise referenced anxiety, fear, and exhilaration as routine companions to their posting practices, confirming that affective management is inseparable from technical skill.

Within the Philippine moral economy, male erotic display is never purely personal. It is mediated through *pagkalalaki*, linking virtue to self-restraint, composure, and provision (Cañete, 2011; De Castro, 1995; Pingol, 2001). To appear desirable yet dignified demands aesthetic judgment: too much exposure risks feminisation or disgrace; too much modesty undermines the erotic contract with followers. The clothed modality with towels, gym shorts, and the bathroom mirror, visualises this balance. The body becomes disciplined, hygienic, and aspirational, recoding sensuality as fitness and self-care. Following Benedicto (2014) and Garcia (2009), such imagery enacts a postcolonial strategy of respectable transgression, where modern masculinity is forged through the reconciliation of desire and decorum. Filipino masculinity is not monolithic. Region, class, generation, and urban/rural location shape how discretion and exposure are calibrated. While this dataset cannot systematically map these differences, traces suggest internal variation that future creator-led research could explore. Labor's (2025) respondents also emphasised tidiness, humour, and "not showing everything" as expressions of responsibility, underscoring that composure remains central to digital erotic capital.

The blurred modality intensifies this negotiation through calculated opacity. Here, anonymity functions as a professional resource rather than an index of shame. Concealing faces with shadows, emoji overlays, or surgical masks produces "strategic incomprehensibility," marking a communicative style rooted in colonial histories of concealment as survival (Rafael, 2013). Blurring acknowledges danger while asserting authorship: the subject determines the limits of recognition. Pandemic masks, fetish hoods, and cartoon visors turn concealment into spectacle, making privacy itself a visible aesthetic. This controlled opacity resonates with Tadiar's (2021) account of postcolonial survival as aesthetic endurance, with the capacity to remain visible enough to live while refusing full transparency to power. In the context of Labor's (2025) study, digital sex workers referenced switching accounts, posting via pseudonyms, and masking identities in response to platform deactivations, all tactics of managed visibility.

In the exposed modality, where the face and genitals are clearly visible, visibility operates as assertion and risk. Creators frame exposure as professionalism and authenticity through hashtags such as #RealAccount or #MyOwnVideo, converting vulnerability into brand credibility (Abidin, 20; Hardy, 2013). Yet this sovereignty remains fragile. Platforms retain ultimate control through opaque moderation systems that regulate what can appear. The watermark, an emblem of authorship and property, thus symbolises a fragile autonomy. As Gillespie (2018) and Bishop (2020) argue, moderation policies instantiate a moralised algorithmic gaze; creators' self-labour in managing these thresholds exemplifies Foucault's (1977) dispersed governance of bodies through internalised technique. Labor (2025) likewise documented how GBT creators feared deplatforming, losing revenue, or being outed, highlighting how exposure always unfolds under threat of erasure.

Across these modalities, Filipino creators perform a form of aesthetic governance, a choreography of discretion that materialises through gesture, filter, and caption. Privacy

operates tactically rather than defensively: a situated practice of governance from below that sustains agency within surveillance capitalism. This resonates with Van Doorn and Velthuis's (2018) concept of adaptive professionalism, wherein erotic labourers refine how much to reveal to remain both searchable and safe. The Filipino case adds cultural specificity. As Labor (2025) observed, humour, irony, and *hiya* serve as moral idioms that temper erotic display. These are not constraints imported from the West, but durable ethical grammars hybridised with Catholicism and neoliberal aspiration. The play, lightness, and self-parody that animate many posts is a symptom of Filipino digital culture, in which humour functions as a social lubricant amid constraint (Soriano and Cabanes, 2020). The captioned apologies, like "too risky, hope this stays up", perform affective literacy as much as caution, transforming anxiety into style.

This postcolonial reframing provincialises Western visibility politics, which equate emancipation with exposure. As Puar (2013) and Mahmood (2005) show, agency often materialises through discipline rather than defiance. Filipino male creators inhabit this paradox, translating moral restraint into creative capital. The labour of privacy is simultaneously aesthetic, economic, and ethical. It reproduces the cultural logic that Cannell (1999) identified in Bicolano Catholicism, where virtue is self-control and care for appearance. Yet, it retools that virtue for algorithmic economies: modesty becomes monetisable, discretion becomes service, humour becomes resilience. Labor's (2025) respondents described the disciplined self as central to client trust and repeat purchase, indicating that moral comportment becomes a market advantage.

Indeed, platform infrastructures further amplify these dynamics. Algorithms operationalise erotic visibility by identifying skin tone, motion, lighting, and nudity (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2018). Creators develop "algorithmic literacy," adjusting aesthetics to remain legible yet not punishable. Filters, colour palettes, and textual jokes are not ornamental but infrastructural tactics: ways of addressing, sometimes evading, automated vision systems (Albury et al., 2017). Labor (2025) provides concrete examples of creators managing multiple accounts, adjusting lighting and hashtags to avoid takedowns. These acts reveal how colonial hierarchies of morality persist through tech platforms: the algorithmic reproduction of what Tolentino (2009) calls the colonial gaze continues to eroticise and discipline brown bodies simultaneously, reproducing the double bind of attraction and regulation.

Economically, visibility remains the condition of survival. As Hardy, 2013; Jones, 2020 note, digital erotic content creators continually balance market demands and moral risk. For Filipino creators working in precarious economies and with limited payment infrastructures, this labour extends beyond the screen. Visual privacy becomes a form of what Tadiar (2013, 2021) describes as the remaindered life, wherein dispossession is converted into endurance. Each image embodies negotiations with instability: the wager that controlled exposure will yield momentary security even as it deepens dependence on volatile platforms. Labor (2025) found that creators' earnings peaked and then declined during censorship events, demonstrating that platform labour in this context remains structurally precarious.

These findings carry implications for how visibility and labour are theorised. First, they shift privacy from a legal or informational right to a moral-aesthetic practice embedded in everyday governance and care. The towel, the blur, and the watermark function as

techniques of self-management that materialise contextual integrity (Nissenbaum, 2004, 2011) as a visual ethics. Second, they provincialise liberal models of autonomy by locating agency in relational and collective rather than purely individual terms. Filipino male creators enact respectability; they repurpose it, demonstrating that moral self-presentation can coexist with erotic enterprise. Third, they situate visibility within the global economy of creative labour, where being seen entails affective calibration, algorithmic negotiation, and emotional endurance. Labor (2025) frames these negotiations as emotional hustling, capturing the entanglement of care, commerce, and risk that defines platformed intimacy. The modality model, therefore, offers a transferable analytic vocabulary for examining visual privacy beyond this specific platform moment.

Methodologically, treating images as labour-objects rather than mere representations extends visual analysis beyond reading signs to tracing processes. Compositional details, such as the framing of mirrors, the placement of emojis, and the texture of blur, render the materiality of digital work visible. Reflexive interpretation proved essential: cultural fluency illuminated local idioms of masculinity while feminist critique disrupted normative hierarchies of gaze and respectability (Haraway, 1988; Rose, 2015). The decision not to reproduce explicit images mirrors the ethic of visual privacy itself: a methodological stance of discretion that resists academic re-objectification of sex workers (Blunt and Wolf, 2020; Sanders et al., 2018). This approach aligns with Labor's (2025) call for ethics of care in researching queer digital sex work, where representation must remain accountable to the conditions of labour.

However, there are, inevitably, limits to this study. The dataset privileges creators with large followings who can afford greater visibility and relative safety within platform economies. Those operating anonymously, in small peer networks, or via encrypted channels such as Telegram, remain outside the analytic frame, limiting the study's ability to capture practices of discretion that occur beyond algorithmic visibility (Hearn, 2017; McGlotten, 2013). The analysis also draws solely on publicly accessible material; while this enables ethical transparency, it constrains interpretation of intention, affect, and meaning, which are better illuminated through dialogical or participatory methods (Duguay, 2016; Pink, 2013). The exclusion of creators who have been deplatformed or self-censored due to legal and familial pressures likewise restricts insight into the full spectrum of digital precarity and disappearance (Blunt and Wolf, 2020).

Moreover, as Hardy, 2013; Labor, 2025 emphasise, digital sex work is profoundly intersectional and context-specific. Focusing on Filipino male creators risks overgeneralisation, as colonial, religious, and racial formations differ markedly across Southeast Asia. Comparative work incorporating Thailand, Indonesia, and diasporic Filipino contexts could reveal how distinct moral economies and platform ecologies shape the politics of opacity and exposure. While usernames, hashtags, and occasional Filipino flag iconography appeared, this study did not systematically code for regional linguistic markers (e.g., Bisaya usage) or spatial semiotics (rural vs urban settings). Future research could examine how regional identity inflects visual privacy practices. Research might also combine visual and ethnographic approaches—multi-platform tracing across X, OnlyFans, and TikTok—to map how creators navigate algorithmic governance across interfaces and economies (Van Doorn and Velthuis, 2018). Expanding toward participatory or collaborative visual methodologies would also help redistribute interpretive authority,

ensuring that analyses of visibility do not replicate the extractive dynamics they critique (Haraway, 1988; Rose, 2015).

Despite these limits, the analysis advances three theoretical contributions. It extends privacy theory from the informational domain to the aesthetic and affective, provincialises visibility by demonstrating that opacity can be agentic, and reframes visibility itself as labour because it involves a continual calibration among power, morality, and desire. These insights contribute to broader debates on digital intimacy and governance. As Illouz (2007) and Light (2013) observe, self-disclosure is now central to social life; the erotic labourer's negotiation of exposure and control foreshadows the dilemmas of digital citizenship more broadly. Filipino creators are not marginal to these dynamics but exemplary: their practices foreground the intelligence required to live within infrastructures that demand to see everything while punishing those who show too much. As future research, comparative work with Filipina creators would sharpen the gendered specificity of tapang and hiya. Women's face-visibility may operate within different moral economies and cannot be assumed to map directly onto pagkalalaki. Also, a feasible extension would be a small, contemporary spot check using the same modality indicators to assess persistence under newer governance regimes.

Ultimately, visual privacy captures the paradox of the platformed sexual economy: to endure, one must master the very infrastructures that endanger survival. The Filipino creators examined here render that mastery aesthetic. The towel, the blur, the watermark, and the mask become emblems of both discipline and artistry, adopting objects that index care, wit, and endurance. They embody what Berlant (2011) termed the "ordinary affect" of late capitalism: the creative labour of staying afloat in systems that offer little security. In this light, discretion emerges not as a lack but as expertise; opacity becomes not silence but eloquence. Privacy, far from retreat, is performance—the act of choreographing one's visibility in a world that makes exposure the condition of existence. In the global erotic economy, these men remind us that to appear safely is to work ceaselessly: to compose, to calculate, to care. Their images do not simply decorate digital space; they articulate a philosophy of endurance.

## Acknowledgments

The first author extends sincere gratitude to the faculty and staff of the Centre for Gender Studies at the University of Cambridge for their guidance, support, and intellectual community throughout the development of this work. Deep appreciation is also extended to the examiners whose thoughtful engagement and rigorous assessment of the dissertation formed the initial basis for this article.

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## Ethical Cosiderations

The study received ethics board approval for Humanities and Social Sciences Research Committee (HSSREC), University of Cambridge, under HSS REC Reference No. 21.292. issued on 12 April 2022.

## Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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