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Seen but Not Sovereign: Visibility, Power, and the Unhoused Content Creator

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Abstract: Applying standpoint theory and the heteropatriarchal triad, this paper argues that unhoused social media creators produce knowledge grounded in lived experience that platforms systematically suppress. Visibility alone doesn't translate into power within these platform structures.

INTRODUCTION

Homelessness remains a significant issue in the United States, with millions of people experiencing housing insecurity each year [1]. In recent years, scholars and advocates have increasingly started to use the term "unhoused" rather than "homeless" to emphasize that housing instability results from structural conditions rather than individual failure [2], yet public perceptions of homelessness continue to be shaped by media representations that present the issue through narratives of personal behavior, mental illness, or substance use, rather than acknowledging the systemic causes. In reality, homelessness is largely the result of failed policies, affordable housing shortages, wages that don't keep up with rising rents, and inadequate safety nets [3].

The rise of social media has introduced a powerful new way in which these narratives about homelessness are both contested and amplified. Social media platforms such as TikTok and YouTube have become sites for widely viewed content about homelessness, where a lot of the content is produced by housed creators documenting acts of charity towards unhoused individuals. Some critics have compared this to "poverty porn," which is content that reduces unhoused people to objects of sympathy rather than letting them speak for themselves [4,5]. Yet, unhoused creators have begun to increasingly use these same platforms to document their own experiences with homelessness, challenging these dominant narratives [6]. In this sense, social media functions as what some scholars call an "identity technology," which is a site where users can construct and present themselves through certain platform features, algorithms, and audience interactions [7].

Drawing on standpoint theory, this paper argues that these two types of content don't simply offer different perspectives on the same reality but instead produce fundamentally different kinds of knowledge. Standpoint theory suggests that marginalized groups, because they must navigate both their own lived realities and the dominant narrative's perceptions of them, can generate more critical and objective insights into social structures than those who are in positions of privilege [8]. In this context, unhoused creators don't merely provide an alternative viewpoint. Rather, their content reflects forms of knowledge grounded in lived experience that housed creators can't relate to.

However, the same digital platforms that allow these perspectives to spread are structured by logics similar to those of the heteropatriarchal triad, where sovereign authority, property, and personhood operate together to determine who is recognized as a full subject [9]. Without stable identifiers such as an address or phone number, unhoused individuals often fall outside the systems where authority recognizes and protects personhood. Platform infrastructures uphold this logic, as access to monetization tools, verification systems, and algorithmic visibility frequently depend on forms of stability that housing insecurity makes difficult to maintain.

This paper therefore asks: How do unhoused people navigate social media as both content creators and subjects of content, and what does this reveal about digital access as a survival strategy? For unhoused creators, social media can be a space to produce knowledge that mainstream narratives often ignore,

even though the platforms hosting that content weren't designed with their needs in mind and can marginalize those very voices they make visible. In this context, visibility doesn't necessarily translate into power.

This work is in partial fulfillment of the ENGR184 course using the blueprint curriculum in Ref [10,11] and captured in a collection [12].

METHODS

This paper uses scholarship from sociology, media studies, and science and technology studies to examine representations of homelessness on social media, particularly on platforms such as TikTok and YouTube. Existing research on social media content related to homelessness was reviewed to identify patterns in how unhoused individuals are portrayed as well as how unhoused creators represent their own experiences online. The analysis is guided by standpoint theory and the heteropatriarchal triad, both of which center lived experience, social position, and interconnected systems of power in shaping how knowledge is both produced and suppressed.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

Structural and Material Barriers in the Unhoused Community

The heteropatriarchal triad, known as the interconnected system of sovereign authority, property, and personhood that together determine who is seen as a person and who is seen as a nonperson [9], shapes not only who has shelter, but also whose identity is "stable" enough to participate in digital spaces. Unhoused people often lack government-issued IDs, residential addresses, and documentation that both legal and digital systems require for recognition [13]. These barriers aren't neutral design choices, but rather reflections of the same exclusionary logic that structures life offline.

Although the digital divide in terms of basic device ownership has narrowed, where approximately 94% of unhoused adults own a cell phone [14], ownership alone doesn't capture the full picture. Rhoades et al. [14] found a 56% turnover rate in devices and a 55% turnover rate in phone numbers within three months, meaning that maintaining a constant online presence requires continuous effort. Devices can be lost, stolen, or sold to meet immediate financial needs, producing what McInnes, Li, and Hogan describe as a "fragmented digital personhood," where a stable digital identity is difficult to sustain for unhoused people [15]. Even simply keeping a phone charged requires navigating spaces where unhoused individuals are often unwelcome, as many businesses enforce anti-loitering rules that limit access to outlets [16], and public library sessions are frequently constrained by strict time limits [17].

These barriers extend beyond simple device access and into the infrastructure of digital platforms themselves. Thurman et al. [16] found that unhoused individuals identified the phone number requirement on employment platforms as a significant obstacle. Account verification on social media platforms also frequently requires forms of identification such as ID cards, social security numbers, or birth certificates, all documents that housing insecurity makes difficult to safely store and maintain [13]. Even creating a basic social media profile typically requires a stable email address and a consistent digital identity, which scholars describe as a "digital character" built from reliable data such as location and patterns of activity [7]. For unhoused individuals, meeting these requirements and forming a "digital character" is often not possible.

These constraints extend further into platform monetization systems. Creator programs such as YouTube's Partner Program and TikTok's Creator Fund, along with payment processors like PayPal and Stripe, require bank accounts, verified identities, social security numbers, and permanent addresses. In practice, these requirements exclude many unhoused individuals from fully participating in digital economies. From the standpoint of the heteropatriarchal triad, this exclusion reflects the system operating as designed, with the same structures that deny unhoused people stable legal recognition offline being reproduced within infrastructures online.

Representation and the Controlling Image: The Housed vs. the Unhoused

The digital narrative of homelessness on social media is shaped by a fundamental imbalance in whose knowledge is recognized as legitimate. Turuba et al. [4] found that many widely viewed videos with the "#homelessness" hashtag are produced by housed creators documenting acts of charity toward unhoused individuals. In these videos, the narrative typically centers on the generosity of the content creator, positioning them as a rescuer, while the unhoused person becomes an object of sympathy rather than the author of their own experience.

This dynamic reflects what Patricia Hill Collins describes as a "controlling image," a simplified representation that reinforces existing social hierarchies by making structural inequalities appear natural or inevitable [18]. Shields [19] documents how media coverage consistently frames homelessness through individual failure, such as mental illness, substance use, or poor decision-making, rather than relating it to systemic factors like housing shortages or stagnant wages. From a standpoint theory perspective, this isn't just bias, because housed creators don't have access to the kind of knowledge that comes from living it.

By contrast, when unhoused individuals create content about their own experiences, they generate forms of knowledge grounded in their lived reality that are largely inaccessible to outside observers. The nature and significance of this knowledge production is examined in the following section.

Self-Authorship: Regaining Personhood

Unhoused creators respond to these controlling images by producing knowledge that housed creators structurally can't. For many unhoused individuals, becoming a content creator represents a shift from being the subject of someone else's narrative to actively shaping how their experiences are represented and understood.

Kennedy and Sardarabady's [6] study of two young unhoused women using TikTok and YouTube illustrates this shift directly. Rather than centering crisis or hardship, their content highlighted routine activities, such as work, self-care, and community interaction, that challenge the controlling images dominant in mainstream media. Using their platforms as a "relational diary," these creators documented daily life in ways that assert what the study describes as a "more-than-homeless" identity, refusing to be defined by a single social category [6]. From a standpoint theory perspective, this kind of representation demonstrates how lived experience produces forms of knowledge that outside observers often overlook.

Audience interaction plays an important role in this process as well. Fransen-Taylor [17] documents a case study of @HA1, an unhoused Twitter user who posted over 1,400 tweets during their period of homelessness, demonstrating how social media can function as both a space for political participation and a source of support. @HA1's online presence helped create a network of followers who engaged with their posts and, over time, contributed to the support that eventually helped them exit homelessness. Comment sections and exchanges can also become spaces where viewers challenge stereotypes, express solidarity, and sometimes facilitate mutual aid through digital payment platforms [6]. Through these interactions, unhoused creators are not only sharing their own experiences but also helping build communities of knowledge that challenge dominant narratives about homelessness.

Yet, this self-authorship still has limits. The visibility, voice, and community that social media provides are not the same as the legal personhood the heteropatriarchal triad withholds. Unhoused creators can build audiences and challenge controlling images while simultaneously being denied the stable identities that platform monetization requires, a paradox examined in the following section.

The Platform Paradox

The tension between self-authorship and the limits of legal and digital recognition becomes more apparent in the economic logics of social media platforms. TikTok and YouTube rely on engagement-driven algorithms that prioritize emotionally compelling or highly shareable content. That is, stories of hardship and survival often attract strong audience engagement, generating advertising

revenue and increasing platform value. For unhoused creators, this means their lived experiences can become profitable content for the platform while offering them not much direct benefit.

The logic of the heteropatriarchal triad is particularly visible here. Platform economies operate through the same sovereign/property/personhood structure, where monetization requires stable addresses, verified identities, and documented personhood, all barriers discussed earlier. When these stories generate engagement, the platform profits from them, but the creators themselves often can't access that revenue because of said barriers. In this sense, visibility on these platforms can translate not into economic power but into profit for the platform itself.

The assumption that platforms are neutral masks the political and economic logics built into their design. Algorithmic amplification, monetization systems, and verification requirements all assume who a "normal" user is and what stability they're expected to have, and in doing so, reproduce the triad's structure. Unhoused creators may challenge controlling images and build real communities, but they're still doing it on infrastructure they don't own, and the platforms profiting from their content aren't required to address the systemic issues that cause housing insecurity.

CONCLUSIONS

Unhoused creators can build audiences, challenge stereotypes, and document their lives on their own terms, yet the visibility they gain doesn't fully translate into equal influence or security. Social media makes it possible to share experiences and fight back against harmful narratives, but access to recognition, resources, and economic benefits remains unequal. As a result, participation online reflects many of the same inequalities that are prevalent in life offline, leaving visibility as a limited form of empowerment.

Any meaningful change would require digital systems that prioritize access instead of assuming stability. This could include payment methods that don't depend on permanent addresses or traditional bank accounts, stronger protections against platforms profiting from marginalized users without compensation, and greater transparency about how algorithms determine whose content is promoted. While such changes wouldn't eliminate inequality, they could reduce the structural barriers that prevent unhoused creators from benefiting from the attention their content generates.

However, platform reforms alone can't address the broader and systemic conditions that produce homelessness. Alternative approaches, such as mutual aid networks organized by unhoused communities or publicly supported digital spaces where creators fully control their own stories, can be more sustainable ways to support representation without relying entirely on corporate platforms.

Ultimately, the experiences of unhoused content creators show that being seen through social media doesn't automatically equal empowerment. From a standpoint theory perspective, their content reflects forms of knowledge grounded in lived experience that are often missing from dominant narratives, yet the impact of that knowledge is constrained by the structures where it circulates. These platforms still rely on systems of identity, property, and recognition that exclude people without stable housing, reinforcing the same patterns of exclusion that exist offline. Being seen matters, but without structural change, visibility remains only a partial form of recognition.

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