

Beyond the Image: Female Art Models in Contemporary Photography— Precarious Work, Relational Labour and Gendered Digital Visibility

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Abstract

This research examines the work of female photographic models as a largely invisible and precarious form of labour situated at the intersection of the gig economy, body work, aesthetic labour, and emotional labour. Based on twenty semi-structured interviews conducted primarily in France, the research explores how models navigate poorly adapted legal frameworks for independent and amateur practices, as well as economic instability, emotional vulnerability, and the time-consuming, highly gendered relational labour generated by digital visibility and the constant need to maintain an online presence. These conditions create significant power asymmetries and, in some cases, expose models to sexualized behaviours and gender-based violence from photographers. Despite their prevalence, these realities remain largely unknown to the public, are often overlooked in academic research, and are seldom discussed by the models themselves. By shedding light on these experiences, this study contributes to broader debates on precarious labour, gendered visibility work in digital environments, and the hidden forms of labour underpinning contemporary cultural production.

Keywords: photography, art modeling, precarity, relational labour, women artists

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Introduction

Photographic models belong to the broader category of art models, individuals who pose for visual artists, thus constituting an essential component of the artistic creation process. Artists use bodies, facial expressions and poses as a medium to express emotions and aesthetic ideas. This activity often requires nudity. Countless individuals have served as models since Antiquity for painters or sculptors, either for professional and amateur artists or for art academy students. Art modeling naturally expanded to photography, following its recognition as a legitimate artistic medium through Sir William Newton's address to the Photographic Society in 1853 (Newton, 1853).

Despite their central role in artistic creation, models remain invisible in many ways. First, their names are almost never mentioned in art history up to the 19th century, and even after this period, they largely remained anonymous apart from few exceptions. Photographic models are no exception. Moreover, their activity has also received little academic attention, while numerous studies examine photographers, history and techniques of photography, and dedicated scientific journals exist on these topics. For example, when a book about fashion photography devotes one chapter to the relation between photographer and model, only photographers' perspectives are presented (Monneyron, 2014). When Roland Barthes gives insights on his experience of posing, it differs greatly from a regular art model (Barthes, 1980). Finally, when (Lutz & Collins, 1991) describes the multiplication of "gazes" (the photographer, the magazine, the magazine reader...) after Laura Mulvey and John Berger observations, the point of view of the person being photographed is absent.

Apart from Florence Rivières' self-edited book (Rivières, 2017), autobiographical accounts by photographic models are themselves remarkably rare. Even in these narratives, photographic modeling occupies only a small part within broader life stories, while greater attention is devoted to interpersonal relationships, public reputation and sometimes harsh experiences with men (Neggizia, 2020) (de Mérode, 1955/1985). Although models' bodies are highly visible in photographic art, the reality of their activity thus remains largely unknown to the general public.

This invisibility is all the more striking since the activity has profoundly changed over the last two decades in terms of communication and promotion. From printed portfolios and comp cards addressed mostly to photographers and agencies, models now have access to several tools, from online portfolios to social media and subscription-based platforms. This multiplication of platforms has considerably changed the ways photographers and general public access models and vice versa, extending it far beyond the photoshoot and leading to continuous online visibility, self-presentation, and audience management.

However, these important transformations have done little to improve public knowledge on photographic modeling. This invisibility extends to their working conditions, and the different forms of labour going with their activity, making the different forms of precarity they encounter largely invisible as well.

The results presented are a follow-up of a first research (Abellard, 2024) focused on Internet communication and platform choices, based on a panel of more than 600 Francophone photographic models, which showed an average age of approximately 31 (from 18 to 72 years old), a largely feminized activity (90 % of models defining themselves as women). Factors such as age, acceptance of nude photography and being a woman had an influence on

some platform choices. Since it relied strictly on statistical analysis without giving a voice to photographic models, it could not capture their lived experiences.

Facts on Photographic Models

Understanding the interactions surrounding photographic modeling is a complex task, requiring to go beyond the photo shoot itself.

Models are in contact with photographers through online platforms, their interactions being based on photographs and text messages. They can get artistic collaboration, contract and earnings from photographers. It implies a legal framework defining the working conditions and image rights issues. In principle, the center of the relation is artistic creation.

Models can also be in contact with the general public (followers) through social media, where they can get feedback from her work, greater visibility increasing their chances to be more visible to photographers, and a community built around their photographic activity. Finally, a minority of models use paid subscription platforms where they can get an income in exchange of exclusive content and private chats.

Being a model requires personal investment and skills to cope with the embarrassment of posing (Shusterman, 2024) and the anxiety about the final result (Barthes, 1980). This investment involves several psychological and sociological aspects. Modeling is primarily a body work, as a work performed is one's own body (Gimlin, 2007). It is also an emotional labour, as the "management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display [that is] sold for a wage" and a labour that disproportionately affects women (Hochschild, 1983). Emotional labour operates both in the relationship with the photographer and in the creative process, since photography is supposed to convey emotions from the artist to the viewer.

Emotional labour relates to aesthetic labour (Witz et al., 2003), referring to the process embodied capacities and attributes are transformed into skills and forms of presentation. Models who use social media also operate within a digital attention economy (Bentes, 2025) where the exposed body is a highly valuable resource competing for public attention, hence the valuable symbolic capital given by the claimed authenticity of the artistic approach in a mostly amateur context (Voronova, 2026).

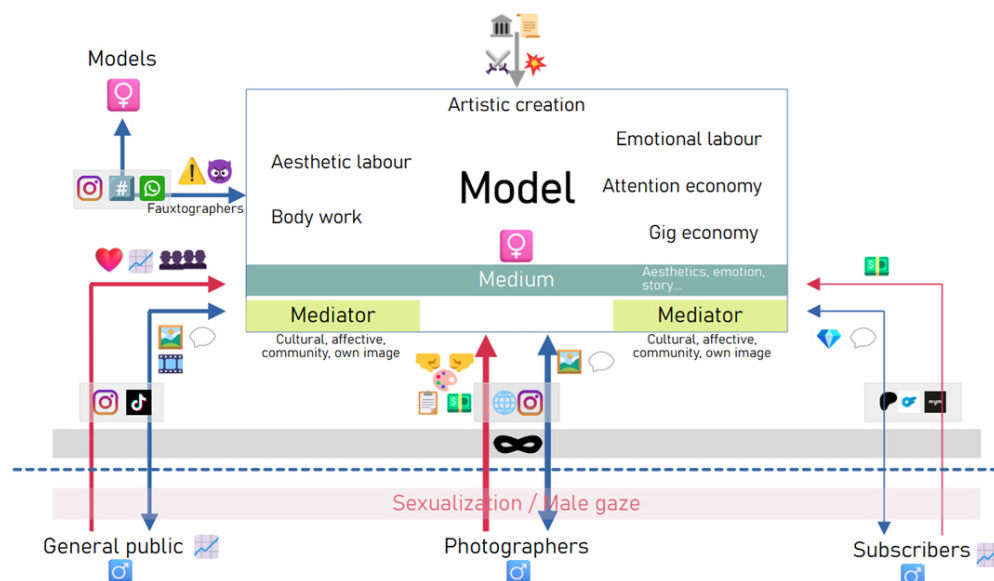
As an irregular, project-based activity involving a limited number of clients, flexible working hours, and extensive reliance on digital platforms, photographic modeling can be considered part of the gig economy (Woodcock & Graham, 2020) as is live modeling.¹

The photographic model also acts as a mediator for different audiences on digital platforms. She serves first as a cultural mediator between photographers and her personal audiences, thus introducing audiences to artists. By adding captions, hashtags and contextualization, and thus adding her own interpretation to images, she also performs an affective mediator role. On social media, she furthermore contributes to building and maintaining a community centered on her work, bringing together hundreds to thousands of people around a common

¹ Saffroy-Lepesqueur L. (2022). "Modèles vivants, une profession toujours aussi précaire" [Live models, a profession as precarious as ever], *Le Journal des Arts*. <https://www.lejournaldesarts.fr/campus/modeles-vivants-une-profession-toujours-aussi-precaire-162274>.

interest on her visual production. Finally, she curates her own image, by photography selection and audience interaction.

Figure 1 summarizes the complexity of the photo model activity (the model-to-models part will be explained in Relational subsection).



Research Question

2 Couloute J. (2021). “The root of female erasure in photography”, *femLENS*. <https://femlens.com/blog-post/the-root-of-female-erasure-in-photography/>

2010s, and subscription-based platforms appeared in the late 2010s (Abellard, 2024). While the expansion of online audiences has increased the visibility of photographic models, it has also increased their amount of relational labour and their exposure to sexualization. These intertwined dimensions can result in multiple forms of precarity with consequences for both physical and mental health, far removed from the models' initial intentions.

However, little research has examined precarity in photographic modeling. Some studies dealing with fashion photography provide valuable insights into sexual harassment (Crowley, 2021), inappropriate behaviours and sexual objectification during Fashion Weeks (Rodgers et al., 2021), as well as bystander inaction and complicity which contributes to their normalization (Crowley, 2024). Other forms of precarity are scarcely documented in academic publications.

This raises the following question: how, and to what extent, do legal, financial, emotional, and relational dimensions contribute to precarity in photographic modeling?

To address this gap, this article adopts a multidimensional approach to precarity by examining these dimensions through interviews with photographic models.

Methodology

Sampling Strategy

The study examined photographic models who identified as women on online portfolio platforms or social media. The goal was not to be statistically representative, but rather to provide an in-depth exploration of their lived experiences across diverse profiles. Semi-structured interviews with 20 female models were conducted between 2023 and 2025. Participants were contacted through their online portfolios or Instagram, the two main platforms used by models (Abellard, 2024). Nineteen interviews were conducted either by audio/video call ($n = 17$) or in person ($n = 2$) and were recorded and transcribed, while one participant responded via e-mail. For privacy reasons, interviewees were anonymized and assigned a random number between 1 and 20.

The interview guide explored several aspects from the participants' initial motivations to their interactions with different audiences. These questions addressed the different dimensions of precarity experienced by models. Being a highly sensitive topic, sexual and gender-based violence was not addressed unless the participants chose to raise it themselves.

Out of the twenty interviewees, sixteen work in France. France was chosen both for practical accessibility to participants and its particularly relevant legal framework illustrating the mismatch between law and actual practices. The four other participants provided different perspectives, particularly on legal and social contexts. In accordance with the French *Data Protection Act*,³ no questions were asked and no data was collected regarding the respondents' ethnic origins, political, philosophical, or religious views.

3 Loi Informatique et Libertés (1978), 78-17.

Sample Characteristics

Participants' mean age is 30.45 years old (min = 21, max = 46, SD = 6.31), in accordance with (Abellard, 2024). Their average modeling experience is 7.2 years (min = 1, max = 17). The following characteristics are presented since they are closely related to the different forms of precarity examined in the following section.

75 % of the interviewees are available to nude photography, which may expose them to sexualization more frequently.

30 % of respondents are either students or unemployed which makes them potentially more vulnerable to financial precarity. The other participants come from a wide range of occupations (bank advisor, logistics, tea sommelier, salesperson, hydropractor...). Only one participant holds a secure public-sector position in higher education, though with a relatively modest income. None of the models belong to the upper socioeconomic class.

60 % of women interviewed have another activity related to either art (music, movie extras, theater, dance, crafting) or the body (bodybuilding, adult content creation), suggesting that photographic modeling is a part of a broader process of self-expression in accordance with (Rivières, 2017).

35 % of participants regularly use at least one subscription-based platform (Patreon, OnlyFans, MYM) or crowdfunding platform (Tipeee), highlighting their relative importance in the photography digital ecosystem. All but one of this subgroup of participants accept nude photography.

Concerning the four models living outside France, two have a formally recognized legal status. #3 is registered in Belgium as a complementary self-employed worker. #4 is registered in Israel as an artist, her live modeling activity being considered an extension of her broader artistic practice. Based in Colombia, #13 is a self-photographer, deriving no income from modeling, providing an interesting position. Finally #1 has no legal status in Tunisia and is also facing sociocultural constraints related to female body visibility.

Precarity: Overview

The interviews reveal five interrelated and overlapping forms of precarity. They are presented separately for analytical purposes.

Legal

55 % of the interviewees (10 French and 1 Tunisian) operate outside existing legal frameworks by earning an income while their practice does not fall within any recognized status. Of the remaining 45 %, only one-third receive a payment through a legal framework (#3, #4 and #17, a French woman signed with a modeling agency), while the other two-thirds carry out their activity through unpaid collaborations.

In Tunisia, art modeling is not recognized and is part of a widespread informal economy that makes up more than 40 % of the Tunisian economy.⁴ It also takes place within a social

⁴ Lopez-Acevedo, Gladys C.; Ranzani, Marco; Sinha, Nistha; Elsheikhi, Adam Youssef. (2023).

organizational ambiguity inherent to Tunisian society, used as a negotiation tool (Zghal, 1994). #1 regrets this context that turns against her when she attempts to formalize her situation, reducing opportunities:

It's not very organized, that's why I created my own contracts, because when I want to sign a contract, they tell me 'it doesn't exist'. So I bring my own and it scares everyone so I lose the offer. (...) Agencies and photographers don't even want to hear about image rights questions. (#1)

In France, the legal status of mannequin working for a modeling agency (Jalabert, 2021) and live model⁵ exist, but only as salaried work, prohibiting invoicing, freelancing or self-employment. Moreover, model agencies primarily working in the fashion sector have strict physical criteria that exclude most photographic models, while art photography requires “a such interesting human diversity” (Rivières, 2017). In addition, photographers are mostly amateurs and therefore cannot issue any invoice. Photographic modeling takes place in a mostly amateur-for-amateur context, where money is supposed to be not involved, but with a general practice of undeclared cash payment (Abellard, 2024), a point developed in the next subsection.

Implications for the models are reflected in their responses. Those involved in unpaid collaborations emphasize on the artistic creation and interpersonal dimensions, and the bias introduced by financial transactions:

I prefer to spend a good time with a photographer I get along with, no money implied for any of us, rather than dealing with a photographer who will pay me and whose work would disappoint me. I don't want (...) to become the photographer's object. (#5)

Concerning (illegally) paid models, while a minority pragmatically accommodates this legal shortcoming by prioritizing immediate financial benefits, a significant proportion highlights the detrimental effects of this situation and interpret it as a structural protection deficit, increasing vulnerabilities to various abuses of power. #19: “If we had a legal status, we would be much better protected against aggressors.”

The legal mismatch between law and practice is consequently at the source of a first type of precarity, intertwined with others, especially financial precarity.

Financial

With the exception of the sole professional model in the panel (#17), all paid respondents are realistic about the impossibility of living solely off this activity. Monthly earnings from photographers are irregular and amount to only a few hundred euros per month, earnings exceeding 800 euros being exceptional. Participants using a subscription-based platform report a monthly income usually between 100 and 300 euros. The payment generated by photographic modeling is thus either considered as a supplement to other income sources or a way to cover clothing or travel expenses. It should be noted that three participants combine

unemployment with informal payments, combining legal and stronger financial forms of precarity.

The irregularity of photoshoots appears to be the main cause of this situation. In a predominantly amateur context, this irregularity is primarily caused in personal unavailabilities from models and photographers. Moreover, since few amateur photographers have a photo studio, they mostly shoot outdoors under favorable weather conditions, which adds an important seasonal aspect.

Additionally, the payment amount is sometimes the result of negotiations with amateur photographers usually having limited financial resources. Furthermore, while nude to erotic photography comes with better financial offers, models' self-imposed boundaries to preserve their integrity and identity always take precedence.

Dependency to social media (notably Instagram) is also significant. While they indirectly increases visibility to photographers, several participants complain both about what they generally call "the algorithm"—referring to the opaque functioning of digital platforms—and the restrictive and unpredictable nudity policies resulting in shadowban or even blocked accounts, felt as unfair, with indirect financial consequences.

Somedays I'll receive dozens or even hundreds, of likes in just a few hours for a simple post. Conversely, I think sometimes a post will do well in line with similar content and I end up with a paltry 16 or 17 likes. I don't understand how it works; it's extremely mysterious. (#7)

Censorship is the downside of Instagram. When I see that there can be very violent videos, sometimes even assaults... you just have to say 'I want to see the post' to access it, but if you show a bit of buttocks or breasts, you get shadowbanned and lose all visibility to those who don't follow you. It's a huge problem on a daily basis. (#16)

Amateur photographic modeling appears therefore to be structured by normalized systemic financial insecurity, being the consequence of several material, relational, and symbolic constraints, as well as legal issues. The irregularity of opportunities, reliance on photographers in a mostly amateur context, the necessity of informally negotiating payment for sessions while safeguarding one's physical and identity boundaries, and dependence on platforms whose opaque operations affect their visibility, all contribute to the regime of restricted and unstable income associated with this activity.

Emotional

A personal and emotional dimension adds to the previously discussed issues, but differs from them in that it predates the entry into photographic modeling. 60 % of individuals enter this activity with a background of low self-esteem, body image concerns, depression, breakup, or a violent marital situation, leading to negative self-perception, fears, loss of trust or a desire to reconnect with their body. #16: "I separated from the father of my children, and consequently I was experiencing a loss of self-confidence. Experiencing boudoir photography was also an opportunity to see myself differently, not just as a mother."

I was under the influence of a quite violent and jealous person, it was the context of my entrance into photography (...) within the framework of a personal reconstruction of my image, of how I perceived myself and of reclaiming my own body. (#19)

These women usually had no prior knowledge of photographic modeling and were often introduced to it by a friend or a photographer among their acquaintances. Most of the participants consider the experience to have positive to therapeutic results on how they perceive themselves. #12: "By doing many photoshoots, without retouching, without filters, without anything, it's helped me get rid of a lot of insecurities I had about my appearance." #4: "I thought to myself that I find a way to crack all my fears about my body."

Several participants explicitly link their initial physical insecurities to the social overvaluation of unattainable bodies, prevalent in women representations in fashion advertisements with extensive use of Photoshop.

But other kinds of emotional issues go on afterwards. One model states: #3 Taking a picture of someone, it's like a gun, it's very aggressive, the person will even not see [the photographer's] face.

Doing so, she points out the inherent (though unintentional) structural violence of the photographic apparatus. First, the model exposes herself physically in somewhat unnatural situations. She also exposes herself mentally; since emotions are part of the artistic creation process, the model and the photographer engage in emotional labour with each other (Shusterman, 2024), the model having her own emotional history. Moreover, the model and photographer are in asymmetric positions. The photographer is in position of deciding the framing and selection, while the model with all her personal complexity, is reduced to an image, and moves from subject to object at the precise moment of photographic capture (Barthes, 1980).

Emotional forms of precarity thus both precede and go on photographic modeling, shaping the way models engage in their interpersonal relationships, with various consequences.

Relational

Online communication is time-consuming for models as a result of their interactions with multiple audiences. Though they mostly have difficulty to estimate it due to its irregular and diffuse nature (especially on social media), the average estimated time from participants' answers is around 90 minutes per day. However, it can extend much longer, one model mentioning going as long as five hours a day on occasion. The following quote summarizes the reasons:

There's a lot of time involved in receiving messages, filtering them to see if they interest you, engaging in conversation, and then seeing if anything comes of it. (...) On OnlyFans, scheduling and managing my posts still takes up quite a bit of time. On Instagram too, it's not just posting a photo; I think about the moment to post them, how to organize them, add keywords... There's a thought process behind it; it's not just spontaneous. (#11)

Participants usually do not have a training in communication, and develop empirical strategies for understanding how to interact with their audiences and organize the timing and content of their publications.

Communication is strongly gendered. Interviewees report that their followers are predominantly male (from 60 to 85 % on Instagram) and their subscribers are almost exclusively male. Photographers appear to be also predominantly male. Communication is also highly asymmetric. On the one hand, models are the ones requested by the followers and subscribers for a private communication. On the other hand, the majority of respondents state that, after some photoshoots and the publication of their first photographs, they are much more requested by photographers than they request them.

An Overall Positive Relation With Followers and Subscribers

Despite these common points, audiences are not equally important to models. Followers and subscribers are not essential to the modeling activity, thus constituting weak peripheral and parasocial support groups. Moreover, when asked about their criteria for publishing photography, all interviewees refuse to appeal to a male gaze concerning portfolios and social media, in favor of their own satisfaction with the photography. Two participants however reconsider their position to some extent when it comes to OnlyFans and MYM, in terms of both photographs and conversations, but always within their self-defined boundaries. Finally, models still have regulatory power by ignoring and blocking disrespectful users.

Almost all respondents consider messages received from followers to be very positive and benevolent, with rare downplayed exceptions. Flirting attempts are usually respectful, one model mentions they work as a boost to self-esteem. Participants using subscription-based platforms even consider communication to be more respectful there, a likely consequence of the financial transaction accompanying the right to send and receive private messages and content.

“Fauxtographers” and Endangerments

Photographers play a far more important position for the model activity. Since photographers generally approach more models than the reverse, models have an *a priori* advantageous position over them. However, the asymmetry in power dynamics still favors photographers, because of their absolute necessity in modeling activity and the frequent financial transaction. Issues related to sexualization and objectification are more problematic in their case since photographers are expected to be used to work with women in vulnerable situations and physical encounters are unavoidable in their relationships.

The legitimacy and intentions of applicants as photographers are often questioned during initial contact. I will use the term “fauxtographer”, adapted from the “fauxtographe” term popular among French-speaking models. According to (Rivières, 2017), a “fauxtographer” is someone with a camera who is sometimes technically skilled, but whose intentions are voyeuristic and can sometimes escalate to sexual assault. Dubious propositions may also occur. For example, three respondents mention receiving overpaid photo shoots propositions which they interpreted as insincere or as a lure for a prostitution network.

During the photo shoot, problems can arise, ranging from trying to push beyond the model's stated boundaries, to making sexist comments or showing a lack of respect. Three

participants (15%) mention such experiences during workshops with several amateur photographers. Finally, nudity done in an artistic context can sometimes be interpreted as sexual availability by the photographer. Two interviewees mention inappropriate sexual talk, one mentions a physical intimate contact proposition and three (15%) report sexual assaults. Two participants also explicitly mention the name of a person who was later convicted of multiple rapes and who had contacted them under the pretext of a photo session. Thus, while the necessary relationship between the model and the photographer often goes well, it may also place her in personal danger, which is favored by the multiplication of contacts enabled by digital platforms.

In response to these situations, models have collectively developed empirical risk-management strategies. The most common anticipatory protective mechanism is requesting to be accompanied to the photoshoot location. Notifying family or friends of the schedule is also used. Finally, peer warnings also exist via specific hashtags, Instagram accounts and models' Whatsapp groups. This explains the model-to-model communication channel in Figure 1, implemented as a preventive and deterrent strategy in this context.

Invisible Issues

Despite the various forms of precarity experienced by models, they remain however largely invisible in their public communication. Several complementary explanations can emerge. Firstly, the logic of visual platforms gives prevalence to bodies, images and aesthetics over all forms of reflexive and critical discourse on the social implications of the creative process.

Moreover, models usually remain silent, except for the occasional public denunciation of inappropriate comments or messages. Although the subject has not been discussed, a hypothesis can be raised: complaining would impact them negatively, discouraging photographers and repelling followers. (Brake, 2005) and (Bergman et al., 2002) demonstrate the social costs of reporting sexual harassment or discrimination, which often triggers retaliation, since the complainant is perceived as transgressing the social order, especially for women. We can also suppose that openly discussing precarity would reframe the model's position from symbolically rewarding to low-paid and dangerous. Some in the audience may also discredit a woman who speaks out by assimilating nudity with sex and the financial compensation with prostitution, similar to the "whore stigma" defined by (Pheterson, 1993).

The invisibility of models even extends to their identity. Historically, not giving models credit was the norm, as shown by (Gerbase, 2018) study on French magazine *Photo*. Many photographers still fail to credit models when sharing their work. Certain framing choices can also increase invisibility and be interpreted in terms of power dynamics as favoring the photographer's agency, as noted by (Deilhaes, 2023) commenting Lucien Clergue's headless nudes.

Finally, pseudonymity (90 % of the panel) helps build a model's artistic identity and serves as a protection from the malicious gazes of relatives and work colleagues, but it contributes to their invisibilization as real persons. Models can therefore be understood as a muted group for all these reasons, which is an additional aspect of the inherent violence of photographic apparatus.

Conclusion

Photographic modeling performed by women is a complex, multidimensional and largely invisibilized form of precarious labour. Precarity is produced and normalized through the interplay of legal, economic, emotional, digital and relational dimensions. Digital platforms have especially contributed to transform models' activity into invisible tasks going from communication to peer warning through community management and risk management. While these platforms allow models to expand their potential network and to share their artistic work, they also increase their workload and the various forms of precarity they endure.

As a strongly gendered activity, the asymmetries in social relations and the vulnerabilities inherent to the photographic apparatus, can contribute to reproduce patriarchal hierarchies. These aspects appear easily manageable concerning interactions followers and subscribers who are described as mostly respectful and benevolent, but can be a threat to the model's integrity when it comes to photographers. Models' difficulties are however invisible to the general public for multiple reasons, this invisibility being reflected in the limited academic research concerning them. Digital platforms contribute to both the visibility of models and the invisibility of their precarity, being in fact part of the precarity production mechanism.

By shedding light on these overlooked experiences, this study aims at contributing to broader debates on precarious labour, gendered visibility in digital environments, and the hidden forms of labour underpinning contemporary cultural production.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that DeepL, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from DeepL, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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