

# Digital Visibility, Influencer Culture, and Gendered Performance in Ana Huang's *Twisted Lies*

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**Abstract:** Contemporary romance fiction increasingly positions digital culture as a site of gendered power, where femininity is structured by compulsory visibility while masculinity is constituted by strategic informational control. This article argues that Ana Huang's *Twisted Lies* (2022) does not merely reflect the conditions of digital labour and surveillance but actively normalizes their gendered asymmetries. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Michel Foucault's account of disciplinary surveillance, and feminist scholarship on influencer culture, the analysis examines how Stella Alonso's trajectory is shaped by curated self-presentation and affective labour while Christian Harper's masculinity is constituted through informational control and covert monitoring. The article contends that the novel romanticizes surveillance-based intimacy and renders the extractive demands of influencer femininity both legible and desirable within mainstream popular romance.

**Keywords:** popular romance fiction, digital visibility, influencer culture, gender performativity, surveillance, digital labour

Social media has fundamentally altered the terms on which gender is performed, recognized, and evaluated, creating new platforms for the enactment of regulatory norms that popular culture both registers and reinforces. Ana Huang's *Twisted Lies* (2022), the fourth novel in the *Twisted Series*, provides a concentrated site for examining these dynamics. Through the parallel trajectories of Stella Alonso, an aspiring Instagram influencer, and Christian Harper, a digital security firm founder, the novel dramatizes the asymmetric gendered conditions that govern digital life: femininity as compulsory, managed visibility, and masculinity as strategic informational control. This article argues that the novel does not merely describe these conditions but actively normalizes their asymmetry, embedding gendered digital power relations within the conventions of popular romance. In doing so, it participates in the broader cultural reproduction of what Judith Butler terms the "regulatory norms" of gender, reproducing them through the structures of digital platforms.

Three intersecting frameworks guide the analysis. Butler's theory of gender performativity establishes gender as a sustained citational practice requiring continuous repetition and subject to ongoing cultural policing. In digital spaces, this performance acquires new platforms, but the underlying logic of regulatory femininity remains operative. Foucault's theorization of disciplinary surveillance shows how visibility functions as a mechanism of power rather than simply a condition of recognition. Feminist scholarship on digital labour situates these dynamics within the political economy of influencer culture, where women are disproportionately required to invest in self-commodification with uncertain returns (Duffy). Together, these frameworks illuminate how *Twisted Lies* maps the demands of digital femininity onto its heroine's interiority, rendering the labour of online self-presentation as natural, desirable, and compatible with romantic fulfilment.

Stella Alonso's narrative trajectory encapsulates these demands with unusual clarity. As an Instagram influencer approaching one million followers, her professional ambition is inseparable from the management of a persona that must appear simultaneously authentic and aspirational. Her decision to enter a fake dating arrangement with Christian Harper is driven explicitly by the logic of the attention economy: as the novel notes, posting about a boyfriend makes people get curious as "People love following other people's love life" (Huang 39). Personal life is converted into content, and intimacy is engineered for engagement, exemplifying the aspirational work of influencer femininity in which the boundaries between lived experience and curated performance are systematically dissolved (Duffy). The predominantly feminized nature of this labour compounds its demands, as women who participate in influencer economies are required to merge product promotion with intimate personal disclosure in ways that efface the boundary between professional performance and authentic selfhood (Drenten et al.), driven by an attention economy that "has swiftly profited off work that is quietly creative but insidiously exploitative" (Abidin).

Yet Stella does not straightforwardly endorse these conditions. Her internal resistance, articulated as a reluctance to live a fake life, registers the psychological costs of sustained performative femininity. This tension exemplifies the authenticity bind, where influencers "must carefully toe the line between visibility and vulnerability" (Duffy and Hund). Stella's narrative enacts this bind at a structural level, as her reluctance to "...shill something she didn't believe in for a quick check" eventually yields to the recognition that "...integrity didn't pay bills" (Huang 37, 42). The societal gaze that compels her participation extends beyond the platform. The novel links her digital labour to patriarchal expectations of feminine worth, noting that a lack of partner meant she was somehow lacking, and that "the sad truth was our value was still tied to our ability to land a partner at least in society's eyes" (Huang 40). These observations show how Stella's digital performance is nested within a wider field of gender regulation in which the demand for relational visibility intensifies the demands of professional visibility. Influencer femininity is not simply performed but finely adjusted in response to algorithmic feedback, producing a mode of self-presentation experienced as natural even as it is

extensively managed (Bainotti). The novel's most pointed commentary arrives when Stella achieves one million followers and finds herself unchanged: "...she was the same person who she had been an hour ago with the same worries and insecurities" (Huang 255). This moment exposes the digital validation economy as structurally hollow. Yet the narrative redeems Stella's digital labour through romantic recognition, leaving the labour structure intact.

The conditions of visibility that govern Stella's trajectory are defined precisely by their asymmetry with those that govern Christian Harper's. If Stella's narrative arc maps onto the feminized demands of compulsory digital visibility, Christian's character embodies informational masculinity: a mode of gendered performance organized around the strategic accumulation and withholding of data. His professional identity as a digital security expert grants him knowledge of surveillance architecture and digital vulnerabilities, translating directly into his management of intimate relations. His insistence on maintaining a clean "digital footprint" (Huang 56), including prohibiting Stella from posting his image, enacts a gendered differential in the conditions of visibility. Where Stella's professional identity requires perpetual public exposure, Christian's power is constituted by deliberate opacity. Men in positions of institutional authority selectively control their digital presence while women are compelled into states of managed visibility, a differential that digital culture has intensified rather than resolved (Duffy and Hund).

Of greater analytical significance is the disclosure that Christian has maintained a covert file on Stella for years, recording details she herself has forgotten. His systematic surveillance of her through a fake Instagram profile establishes a profound asymmetry of knowledge and power. As Foucault establishes, the subject who is comprehensively known by another who remains unknown is constituted as an object of knowledge rather than a subject of action. The novel frames this surveillance as evidence of desire, treating Christian's information-gathering as a symptom of attachment rather than a feature of gendered power. Such practices normalize a model of intimacy grounded in asymmetric knowledge rather than mutual transparency (Hernandez-Santaolalla and Hermida). *Twisted Lies* reproduces this normalization by positioning Christian's eventual disclosure as a relational crisis that is survived rather than a structural condition to be interrogated. His emotional restraint operates analogously: the deliberate withholding of personal disclosure, framed as self-command, reinforces a model of masculinity in which emotional expression is a vulnerability to be managed rather than a capacity for connection.

The ethical stakes of this dynamic are most sharply drawn in the novel's treatment of privacy. When Stella discovers the extent of Christian's covert monitoring, her sense of betrayal is both genuine and forcefully articulated in the text. The narrative acknowledges the violation: intimacy built on asymmetric knowledge rather than mutual disclosure is, by definition, compromised. Yet the narrative ultimately rehabilitates Christian by positioning him as Stella's protector against the stalker subplot, a second and more extreme form of surveillance that transforms digital visibility into physical threat. Stella receives photographs taken of her in public without her knowledge, her image weaponized against her; the stalker's escalation to direct threat and abduction dramatizes the logic of visibility as vulnerability. The harassment and surveillance that women face online are not isolated incidents; "this gender-based resistance now extends into digital arenas" (Sobieraj), constituting a systemic condition that the stalker narrative externalizes and intensifies. The novel's resolution of this threat through Christian's informational resources creates a structural irony: the very competencies that underwrite his own surveillance of Stella are deployed to protect her from surveillance by others. The normalization of surveillance in intimate contexts means such infringements are increasingly experienced as expressions of care rather than violations of autonomy (Hernandez-Santaolalla and Hermida). *Twisted Lies* participates in this normalization, assimilating Christian's surveillance into the romantic narrative of protection and desire and framing its asymmetric character as a feature of intimacy rather than a critique of it.

*Twisted Lies* engages substantively with the gendered conditions of digital culture. It registers the demands of influencer femininity, the precariousness of digital visibility, and the surveillance-based dimensions of masculine authority with considerable descriptive precision. What it does not do is interrogate the structural conditions that produce these costs. Stella's digital labour is redeemed by romantic recognition rather than addressed on its own terms. Christian's surveillance is aestheticized as devotion rather than examined as a power relation. The resolution of the stalker subplot through masculine informational authority reproduces rather than disturbs the gendered asymmetry that structures the novel throughout. Read through Butler's theory of gender performativity and Foucault's account of disciplinary surveillance, the novel reveals itself as a cultural text that is diagnostic rather than critical: it accurately maps the gendered conditions of digital life in the early twenty-first century while embedding those conditions within the affective and narrative infrastructure of popular romance in ways that render them natural and desirable. As popular romance continues to absorb the conditions of digital culture into its generic conventions, texts like *Twisted Lies* will remain important sites for understanding how gendered digital power is culturally reproduced and how fiction participates in that reproduction.

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