

The Curated Life-World: Algorithmic Coercion and Manipulation in Virtual Content Creation

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Abstract

The rapid growth of virtual technologies and communication platforms in the last two decades has led to the growth of an arena of interaction with an unprecedented global reach, as social media and virtual presence increasingly become an everyday reality and much of individuals' discussions and social interactions move online. While it is lauded for bringing larger visibility to socially suppressed voices and making expression more accessible, its content-monitoring algorithms are an active determinant in the process of what discourse finds visibility and engagement and, at the end of the day, shape people's narratives and worldviews. Moreover, the capital and technology intensive nature of social-media platform development has ensured that the origins of these developments have occurred in highly fragmented and concentrated silos led by wealthy nations and have been highly monopolized by corporate behemoths. While usually perceived as "apolitical" or "neutral," these algorithms are often biased toward the social context of knowledge in the societies and companies in which they were developed, as these biases are determined by the training data used and replicated in their results. This article, using Deleuze's society of control as a foundation, studies the effect of monopolized digital platforms in the context of digital creation and how they lead to censorship and manipulation of creators. The article, through a qualitative, thematic analysis of creators engaged in short-form media content and their decisions, discusses the adverse effects of invisible and opaque algorithms on their self-expression, their engagement with their audience, and their experiences with content production.

Categories: Social media and customer relationship management, Computational Intelligence and Information Management, Marketing and Market Issues in Business

Keywords: algorithms, censorship, coercion, content creation, social media platforms

JEL Classifications: L86, J24, Z13, P14, O33, L82

Introduction

Internet-based communication has come a long way since the first host-to-host message was sent over the ARPANET in 1969 (Eschner, 2017). Today, a social media presence is increasingly becoming an integral part of the everyday lives of a significant section of the global population, with popular platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp hosting nearly, if not more than, 3 billion users (Thuy, 2025) globally as social media emerges as one of the primary modes of interpersonal communication. Social media presence has greatly lowered the access cost of reaching out to the masses with your message or communication and has been lauded for allowing greater diversity in discourse, fostering human

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connection, fostering knowledge exchange, and providing space for individual expression (Cobbe, 2020). It has since then emerged as not just a platform for communication, discourse, and debate but also for economic activities and creative labor.

The content on these platforms, given their vast userbase, is monitored through algorithms that determine not only the kind of content that can be published on the platform but also the visibility of posts, accounts, groups, or tags where they are relevant, and reduce information overload (Cobbe, 2020) (Metzler and Garcia, 2023), turning what began primarily as a space for communication into a complex ecosystem with its own invisible governing forces. The possible negative externalities of algorithms on society, such as increasing mental health-related issues including depression, anxiety, loneliness, dysmorphia, addiction, cyberbullying, and harassment, also play a key role in the narrative around online exchanges (Metzler and Garcia, 2023). Algorithms have also been seen as susceptible to magnifying the impact of hate speech, fake news, and polarization, especially due to the possible "bubble" or "echo chamber" (Metzler and Garcia, 2023) through the use of filters. Moreover, these algorithms also allow social media platforms and their companies to move from being mere passive observers to active agents within the communication process, determining priorities and filtering what gets how much visibility. For content creators who are dependent upon social media platforms for their livelihood, including but not restricted to influencers, the algorithm becomes their overlord, determining their visibility and thus, their income. This paradigm of algorithmic control over what labor gets produced and how it gets presented brings us to the phenomenon of "algorithmic coercion" (Liang, 2025). The relationship between the content creator and the social media platform remains highly asymmetrical, skewed to favor the platform over the creator themselves. The platform, through its algorithm (which operates within a "black box"; i.e., the creators do not have complete knowledge or sometimes even no knowledge of how the algorithm functions), dominates the content creator, whose success with the platform's audience is completely dependent upon figuring out and upholding the operative parameters, along with undertaking the risks and responsibilities that come with creative labor, which remain largely assigned to the creators themselves (Liang, 2025). This, for the content creator, creates a highly insecure working environment, compromising the scope of their creativity and editorial authority over their content. To adhere to the norms of the various social media platforms, creators engage in self-surveillance, anticipatory self-censorship, and continued reactive adjustments to their content to maintain their "visibility."

This paper aims to understand how content creators deal with their uncertainty and instability due to algorithmic opacity and how their perceptions of algorithmic preferences impact their behavior in terms of content creation and self-censorship.

Literature review

Managerial Functions of Algorithm

With a systemic shift towards algorithmic curation of the internet, a new model of labor management - algorithmic management - has extended to the highly personalized content creation sector. It was first defined by Lee et al. (Lee et al., 2015) as "software algorithms [...] assum[ing] managerial functions" to allow human labor to be "assigned, optimized, and evaluated through algorithms". Moving forward on these lines, Wood (Wood, 2021) describes it as a systemic assemblage of human and algorithmic actants, often resulting in a high level of automation (Wood, 2024). These algorithms are primed for engagement, optimized to drive interaction through metrics such as clicks, likes, and watch time, which directly correlate with advertising revenue they get (Metzler and Garcia, 2023) (Patil and Devaraju, 2024). Platforms use these metrics to guide creators toward specific behaviors (Wood, 2024). Overall, algorithmic management of content primarily organizes around engagement and drives creators' behavior toward developing content that leads to greater engagement, positive or negative notwithstanding.

As a consequence, creators are compelled to produce content not based on their personal interests, vision or sensibilities, but around what they perceive as algorithm's preference, which may also be extreme, debatable, divisive or emotionally charged material (Metzler and Garcia, 2023). This can lead to the coerced production of diminished content quality in the

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form of "cringe content" - content that is intentionally controversial, objectionable or silly, designed to drive negative engagement. Furthermore, the real-time, quantifiable nature of these evaluation systems creates a hyper-competitive, gamified market (Metzler and Garcia, 2023).

Power Dynamics in "Black Box" Algorithmic Engagement

The skewed power dynamic between platforms and creators represents probably one of the most significant forms of leverage that these platforms hold over their creators. Creators depend on these platforms for audience access and monetization, placing them under strict platform control (Liang, 2025) (Rahman and Sultana, 2025). The threats of "Invisibility" - the sudden suppression of content - whether temporary or permanent, may result in an immediate income instability and unexpected loss of social capital (Rahman and Sultana, 2025) (Strand, 2022). The threat of being "shadowbanned" or permanent account suspension creates a continued state of fear and vulnerability for content creators, without any recourse. This phenomenon, in turn, turns continuous emotional labor and self-censorship into a normal expectation, further institutionalizing the coercive imbalance of the dynamic (Rahman and Sultana, 2025). This precarious relationship and its punitive tether over creators has been termed as "tethered labor" by Liang (Liang, 2025).

The actual workings and the complexities of the algorithms are often masked intentionally, leading to an information asymmetry called "black box gaslighting" where the platform outright tries to undermine the users' confidence in what they feel that they know about the platform's algorithm and discredit any valid criticism by leveraging its epistemic authority over its algorithm, further bolstering the inequality in these relations (Cotter, 2018), (Cotter, 2021), (Strand, 2022), and (Healey, 2014). Without human context, moderation often fails when it comes to subjective areas like body image or sexuality (Riccio and Oliver, 2024), disproportionately targeting marginalized communities (Okoronkwo, 2024). Divon et al. further argue that, beyond the individual technical failures in the algorithm due to training biases and such, platforms actively choose to employ "platform gaslighting" - a technique where they systematically use opaque communication between the creator and the platform as a means of distraction to secure corporate interests over creator accountability. This can take the form of automated denials of guideline violations, moderation biases favoring large accounts or abusers, especially through the misuse of platforms' flagging functionalities, unnotified algorithmic suppression and "shadowbanning," and a convoluted appeals process for de-platforming decisions (Divon et al., 2025). This forces creators into constant anticipatory self-regulation, such as altering images or modifying language to avoid punishment (Duffy and Meisner, 2023).

Another aspect of contention for content creators, especially in terms of Instagram, is the "follower paradox" in short form media content on platforms like Instagram. This refers to the shift of creator visibility being dependent on followers to that of direct engagement and algorithm's managerial roles of curation. Creators and some studies (Arrigada and Ibáñez, 2020) (O'Meara, 2019), (Habib et. al., 2024) allege that Instagram algorithm does not push content even to those who have been long-term followers without paid promotions. The unstable nature of social media platforms, the dependence upon social media to fund their livelihood and the increasing time commitments with the growth of one's platform also come with a host of mental health stressors and triggers for the creator, creating issues like burnout, content performance anxiety, social isolation, financial instability, algorithmic volatility, toxic relationships with metric-based social validation and identity conflict, along with imposter syndrome (Roeder, 2025).

Creators, in an effort to cope with the power imbalance, create their own reflexive action strategies. To deal with "black box" like nature of algorithms, creators develop "algorithmic folktheories," which are probable explanations for how these systems work (Strand, 2022) (Savolainen, 2022), which believe that algorithmic coercion comes not only from the way the technology is envisioned but also by patriarchal and economic biases (Strand, 2022) (Bishop, 2019). However, these tactics, by no means subvert this set-up, rather these tactics are more useful in highlighting the partisanship of algorithmic control. These tactics also allow the creators to continue operating on these platforms as paradoxically, these spaces of coercion are also the space for activism and community (Strand, 2022).

Here, we try to look at these events through what Deleuze (Deleuze, 1992) termed as the concept of "societies of control." The idea of "society of control" is Gilles Deleuze's extension of Michael Foucault's idea of the "panopticon state" or a society of discipline which enforces itself through camps, punishments and violence. Deleuze posits that while Foucault's

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model was reflected in the societies of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they do not reflect the contemporary realities as the society has moved to different arrangement systems, with different priorities, and thus the focus of the state has shifted from discipline to invisible control. He posits that modern society has shifted to a system of invisible, continuous control mediated by mass media and data networks that leads to round-the-clock surveillance and coercion, as they form the primary means of information for an average individual. Their interactions within such a system lends to the system's control over the individual. While there might be certain freedom of movement, so to speak, this freedom is highly dependent upon the surveillor, or the entity in charge. In this framework, individuals are reduced to "dividuals" - where individual identity and behavior are broken down into several fragmented datasets, to variables that can be molded and manipulated, through interventions in their networks of communication and consumption patterns (Deleuze, 1992).

Deleuze highlights the phenomenon through the example of changing nature of capitalism through history, which he refers to as a shift from capitalism of production to a capitalism of product, a shift from the factory to the corporate. Earlier, the focus of the capitalist system was controlling the production process itself. In contemporary times, however, Deleuze points out, capitalism is no longer concerned with control of physical production, rather it wants to "sell services" and "buy stocks." The method of social control, according to him, has shifted from discipline to market. Humans no longer need to be physically enclosed in a system (such as army, factory, or prison) to determine and influence their behavioral patterns. Rather, the market system determines individuals' behavior through their debt, which gives them continuous and unlimited control over an individual's behavior (Deleuze, 1992).

The Global South Context

Within the Indian context, content creation is growing at an exponential rate. According to Satya Praneeth and Durai (Satya Praneeth and Durai, 2025), while the creator economy in India is expected to grow to around \$20 billion by 2030, much of the economic benefit of this growth is expected to be concentrated in the hands of the top-tier creators. Moreover, the legal and policy arena regarding content production remains largely a gray area (Satya Praneeth and Durai, 2025). As this sector grows, it becomes more and more apparent that while there is a growing body of literature on algorithmic management focused on the Global North, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these "tethered" labor dynamics manifest within the specific socio-economic landscape of India, one of the fastest-growing content creation market where regional platform policies and diverse linguistic contexts further complicate algorithmic opacity (Gomes and Sultan, 2024) (Malec and Lešetický, 2024).

In the broader Global South context too, we see the reflection of anxieties related to algorithmic opacity, and the actual space for creative freedom. Suherman (Suherman, 2025) discusses how algorithmic monetization, driven by viewer engagement makes investigative journalism subject to market forces and undermines editorial agency, in the context of Indonesia. Dachwitz, on the other hand, looks at algorithmic oppression not just in terms of its application on social media platforms but at its source as well. In his 2025 book *Digitaler Kolonialismus* (Digital Colonialism) shows how AI-based algorithms touted by social media companies like Meta for content monitoring are a result of mental exploitation of workers in developing countries and underdeveloped countries. The AI is trained on the data input of actual human workers in BPOs all around the world, who have to go through hours of vulgar, sensitive, and violent content to accurately categorize it, that too with no or nominal mental support. These workers often are from marginalized or vulnerable communities, are paid meager wages, lack job benefits or security, and are subject to other unfair practices like misleading job advertisements, non-disclosure agreements, and systematic suppression of unionization (WACC, 2026). Awasthi (Awasthi, 2025) discusses the potential for amplification of radicalizing content on social media platforms due to the very architecture of these platforms that push content based on engagement, without any differentiation for positive or negative engagement. Corporate secrecy, combined with transnational jurisdiction gaps due to differing national legal frameworks further lessen the accountability of these platforms. This study aims to explore the reflexive strategies and perceived vulnerabilities of Indian content creators operating under these conditions.

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Research Method

The paper draws upon Deleuze’s concept of "society of control" as its main theoretical lens, extending Deleuze’s idea of invisible, continuous moderation of individual behavior without any overt coercion, but rather through networked systems. Moreover, his idea of "dividual" - people not as individuals, but reduced to a bundle of metrics, that can be manipulated. This framework is applied to the black box architecture of social media algorithms to understand how they impact creator behavior. The study tries to locate the following three aspects within the interplay of content creators’ perception of social media algorithm and their behavior:

- (a) Algorithmic management and control infrastructure, where the algorithm assumes managerial functions, driving creator behavior to be determined by engagement metrics over creative freedom.
- (b) Labor asymmetry and epistemic opacity, where the creators’ content creation decisions are determined by the threat of "algorithmic invisibility."
- (c) Creators’ reflexive responsiveness and the structural paradox of the operation of resistance within the platform of coercion.

This study uses a phenomenological approach and a qualitative methodology to deeply explore the lived experiences of content creators operating under algorithmic control.

Participants

The study included five content creators from India spanning diverse genres of content. The participants were selected to represent a diverse range across key factors influencing content creation, such as their journey as a creator, initial motivation, geographic location, degree of dependence on content creation income, duration of activity on Instagram, and whether they had quit content creation. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant anonymity (Table 1).

The sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection continued until no new themes or insights emerged from the interviews. It was found that thematic saturation was achieved after interviewing five participants. Accordingly, a final sample of five participants was considered sufficient to address the study objectives.

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines and research policies of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Guwahati. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study. Demographic details of participants have been added to the appendices.

Pseudonym	Genre
Maya	Philosophy
Jenifer	Fashion
Riya	Fashion, Travel, Lifestyle
Faye	Philosophy, Education
Vishal	Politics, Social commentary

TABLE 1: List of participants and genre of content

Procedure

The research employed an approximately one-hour-long semi-structured interview schedule to ensure the conversation remained rooted in the study's matter - algorithm-creator dynamics - while allowing participants sufficient space to introduce relevant information and complex narratives.

The interview was organized into five distinct phases, moving from broad biographical data to specific instances without explicitly stating the research objective. The questions in the first phase included a brief introduction and the participant's motivation for content creation. This was followed by questions regarding their decision-making process in the second phase to better understand the factors affecting the production of a video. The third phase of questions probed deeper into the factors relating to self-expression and self-censorship. The penultimate phase of questions discussed the participant's perception of the functioning of Instagram's algorithm, engagement metric prioritization, style of video editing, script optimization, and source of information regarding the aforementioned. Finally, the research objective was revealed to the participants and they were asked for closing feedback.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling, targeting individuals whose content creation experience was sufficiently mature to provide detailed insight into algorithmic pressure. The researchers reached out to potential participants through professional networks and via direct messages on Instagram. Prior to the interviews, all participants were asked for their informed consent to record the conversation and use the information provided for this research, with the assurance that pseudonyms would be used to protect their identities. All interviews were conducted online. The interviews (data collection) were conducted in the month of October, 2025. The interviews were conducted in English.

The purposive selection of five Indian content creators across a heterogeneous spectrum of genres, ranging from analytical socio-political commentary and literary philosophy to visual-aesthetic fashion, serves to delineate the variable "modulation" of digital labor within Deleuze's theorized "societies of control." This sample directly addresses a gap in contemporary literature concerning the empirical manifestation of the "dividual" in the Global South, illustrating how creators are no longer disciplined in traditional "enclosures" but are perpetually undulatory within an algorithmic "continuous network" that replaces the individual signature with numerical code. The decision to limit the sample to five participants is justified by the requirement for phenomenological depth, allowing for an intensive investigation into the mechanisms of internalized self-surveillance and behavioral modulation. The study uncovers the systemic pressures of "clean aesthetics," "rage baiting," and the "colonial hangover" of Western templates that modulate authentic self-expression into commercially mediated "numerical standards."

The interviews were conducted by the primary researcher, who had no prior personal or professional relationship with the participants. Before each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would remain confidential. To minimize interviewer bias, a semi-structured interview guide was used consistently across all interviews, neutral and non-leading questions were asked, and participants were encouraged to express their views freely. Reflexive notes were maintained throughout the data collection and analysis process to acknowledge and minimize the influence of the researcher's assumptions.

To ensure rigor, the study addressed researcher positionality, audit trail maintenance, and peer debriefing. As scholars from development studies, public policy, and social psychology who actively use the same digital platforms as the participants, the researchers entered the study with pre-existing familiarity with algorithmic dynamics and a prior theoretical commitment to Deleuze's framework, both of which carried the potential to shape data interpretation; this was managed through reflexive journaling and structured team discussions to continuously examine and bracket these assumptions throughout data collection and analysis. An audit trail comprising audio recordings, verbatim transcripts, code lists, and analytic memos was maintained to enable external verification of the interpretive process from raw data to reported findings. Credibility was further supported through structured debriefing facilitated by the multidisciplinary composition of the research team, which enabled ongoing critical interrogation of emerging codes and themes, ensuring analytical categories reflected the data rather than the researchers' prior assumptions.

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Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was then used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the data. This study adopted a theoretical thematic analysis approach, utilizing the concepts of Gilles Deleuze’s "Societies of Control" as the primary conceptual lens through which to interpret the creator experiences regarding platform algorithms and digital labor.

The analysis followed the rigorous, iterative phases of thematic analysis:

Familiarization with the Data: The first author transcribed the interviews and read the transcripts multiple times while listening to the audio recordings to ensure accuracy and achieve deep immersion in the narratives.

Generating Initial Codes: Relevant segments of text were systematically coded. Codes were generated using a combination of descriptive labels and in-vivo coding (e.g., codes like "Money is actually the driving factor," "black box," and "gambler kind of feeling" were applied directly to the text).

Searching for Themes: The initial codes were grouped into broader, internally consistent categories based on underlying coherence (e.g., codes related to unpredictability and inconsistency were grouped under "Algorithmic Opacity").

Reviewing, Refining, and Naming Themes: The initial themes were refined against the original coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure they accurately reflected the data's meaning and were relevant to the research question. The final, analytically distinct themes were defined and named to structure the Findings section: The Erosion of Intrinsic Motivation, The Opaque Algorithmic Authority, and Behavioral Modulation and Strategic Self-Censorship (Figure 1).

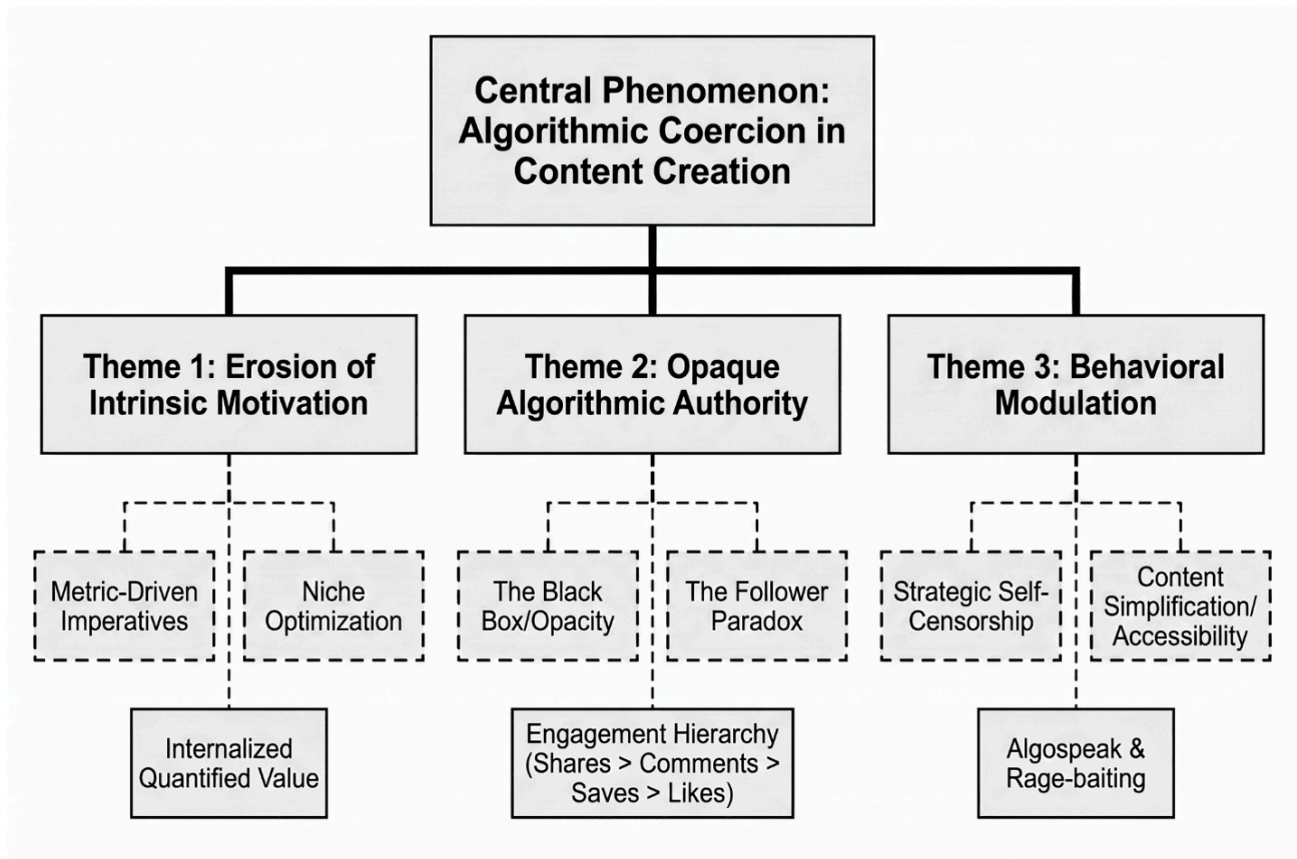


FIGURE 1: Thematic structure algorithmic coercion and behavioral modulation in virtual content creation

Source: Author

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Producing the Report: The literature establishes that the creator economy does exist merely as an economic model but a complex system of continuous, invisible interactions which are surveilled and coerced into specific patterns, closely resembling the societal shift from coercion within enclosures to a society of continuous control put forward by Deleuze's framework (Deleuze, 1992). Unlike traditional labor, creators and their content are continuously monitored and engaged with. Furthermore, their labor becomes easily reducible to data, metrics, and analytics, and the creator must actively engage with and optimize these metrics to stay relevant and employed, embodying Deleuze's "dividuals."

Results And Discussion

Findings

The qualitative, thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews with five content creators revealed three primary findings that characterize the experience of digital creation on short-form media platforms. These findings delineate the mechanisms of control and compromise inherent in the algorithmic environment, focusing specifically on the tension between the creator's authentic voice and the platform's performance demands (Table 2).

Shift from Intrinsic Motivation to Metric-Driven Creation

The initial motivations for content creation were predominantly intrinsic, rooted in personal passion, expertise, and a fundamental desire for self-expression or social commentary. Vishal was driven by a "strong incident" (the loss of an Assamese icon, Zubeen Garg) and a personal belief in the importance of introducing "rationality and factual data" into political discourse in his region. Similarly, Faye began by simply wanting to "talk about books and certain ideas and concepts."

This intrinsic drive, however, quickly became superseded by quantitative and financial imperatives. For several participants, engagement metrics such as the number of views became indicators of content quality. Furthermore, success on the platform quickly altered the creator's definition of achievement. Maya noted that experiencing viral success "makes you greedy" for the next hit, cementing quantitative metrics as the ultimate benchmark.

This shift directly controls the selection and evolution of the content niche. Creators were forced to abandon authentic interests that did not perform well in favor of niches validated by early data:

Maya initially experimented across three niches (philosophy, makeup, and outfits) but quickly observed that "only my Philosophical reels were doing very well getting good engagement." This led her to "stop making beauty reels completely" and "double down on the Philosophy niche," demonstrating a niche selection process dictated entirely by the algorithm's feedback loop.

Faye observed a severe dichotomy where her "well thought out" videos on complex topics received meager visibility (5000-7000 views), while "random, less substantive videos" made quickly could unexpectedly "go viral (250,000 views)." This inherent contradiction led her to feel pressure to produce "stupid" or "reactionary" content, which she found neither sustainable nor substantial, ultimately causing her to feel unfulfilled and quit.

The findings confirm that the primary motivation for sustained creation is not the initial passion but the ability to translate that passion into a measurable, optimized output.

Algorithmic Opacity and the Follower Paradox

The algorithm is consistently described as a "black box," a non-transparent, unpredictable, and often contradictory authority that governs a creator's professional fate. This lack of clear rules breeds significant anxiety and structural frustration.

The Hierarchy of Engagement Metrics: Creators have learned through trial and error that not all forms of engagement are valued equally for algorithmic boosting. Likes are perceived as the "lowest priority" (one creator noted audiences are "very petty about their likes these days"), while metrics indicating deep interaction and external propagation are highly prioritized:

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Shares/Resharing have consistently ranked the highest, as sharing to a personal Direct Message (DM) or story confirms that the content resonated enough for the user to endorse it to their trusted network.

Comments/Debate came up as vital because they spark conversation, prolong content relevance, and are directly prioritized to "boost engagement."

Saves/Reposts were noted as indicating an intent to revisit, though their actual utility is questioned by creators who doubt whether users actually check their saved folders.

This hierarchy compels creators to prioritize content design that triggers these specific high-value actions, rather than focusing purely on production quality or narrative depth. Videos that are "over edited" or developed to their "full potential" often "never reach a good number," forcing creators into a constant state of "guessing" and trying to keep up with the latest changes. Such changes can range from introducing new features in the application (Repost) or introducing a completely new application (Edits), which according to Riya "boosts your videos a little more."

The Follower Paradox: The most contentious structural frustration is the algorithm's failure to reliably push content to existing followers. Creators widely criticized the fact that users who "consciously decided to follow me" (or "voted" for their content) are not guaranteed to see their posts. This is viewed as "very bizarre" and "unfair," as it fundamentally undermines the foundational effort of building a loyal audience.

This paradox ensures that a creator's visibility is never secure; instead of relying on their established follower base, they must continually re-optimize their content to appeal to the unpredictable, broad audience of the "Explore" or "For You" page, maintaining a constant state of productive output.

Behavioral Modulation and Strategic Self-Censorship

Survival and success under the opaque authority of the algorithm requires creators to adopt a range of behavioral modulations that directly impact their authentic expression and their content's ethical stance.

Content Simplification and Accessibility: The need to secure engagement within a short-form format forces a compromise on intellectual depth. Maya explicitly had to simplify her detailed, descriptive writing style, which was "not optimal for Instagram," to accommodate the viewer's "fried attention span." This led to a conscious decision to "simplify it and I have to kind of dumb it down a little for the general audience." This strategic simplification is a direct sacrifice of nuance for maximal visibility.

The Strategic Embrace of Controversy: Creators acknowledge that polarizing content receives more traction on the platform by virtue of people engaging more in the comments, albeit arguing or leaving toxic replies. Maya and Jenifer admitted to putting out content that would have enraged a certain, often premediated, demography who would express their rage in the comment section of the videos; a technique referred to as "rage-baiting." The creators note that "ragebaiting" has its upsides but also downsides that manifest in the form of abuse or harassment and/or a feeling of frustration, as Maya considered it "intellectually irritating."

Proactive Self-Censorship to Manage Risk: Beyond simply avoiding platform strikes, creators engage in extensive proactive self-censorship to manage professional risk and audience toxicity. The self-censorship is often a preemptive step taken to shield themselves from future backlash, such as:

Audience Backlash: Riya actively monitors her content to avoid showing "too much skin" because it "attracts the wrong audience" and "random creeps." She also ceased posting content about common adult social activities abroad after receiving severe "slut shaming" from her audience.

Professional Risk: Jenifer self-censors her outfit choices not out of fear of the general public, but because of the need to maintain a professional image for regional collaborations, fearing potential business contacts "might judge me for the outfit and not provide me something serious."

Identity Management: Riya made a conscious decision to reduce extensive LGBT content because she "did not want to be just the queer creator," choosing to monitor her identity to avoid being confined to a single, easily categorized niche.

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Mental Health and the Cost of Continuous Performance

The combined pressure of opaque metrics, inconsistent rewards, and the constant need for modulation has severe consequences for the creator's mental health and well-being.

Metric-induced anxiety is propelled by opacity surrounding the metrics. Creators such as Riya have admitted to basing their worth on the number of likes received, which is evident from the quote, "I catch myself like checking my views and determining my worth based on that." She further states that engagement metrics in general make her "very anxious." Jenifer has also echoed a similar sentiment in her quote where she expresses her anxiety if she "stops earning." In addition, Maya reveals the frustration of not being able to achieve the same level of virality as achieved before. She states that it leads to anxiety stemming from the inability to replicate previous success.

The "follower paradox" leads to feelings of frustration as mentioned by Maya. She considers the content delivery system to be "illogical" in nature, leading to feelings of confusion and self-doubt. Vishal highlights that unpredictability of engagement may lead to anxiety and burnout among people whose income solely depended on Instagram.

Creator burnout has been documented here in the case of Faye, where a need to constantly keep posting content, along with the implication of posting content, led to her to quitting altogether. Riya further highlights how keeping up with internet trends and learning to produce content is "tiring." She alludes to having to learn new analytics and skills just to "fit in" or risk obscurity.

The implication after posting content has a severe mental health impact. All creators have shared how abusive comments including "rape threats" have led to depressive episodes. However, the burden to deal with such behavior falls on the creators, as stated by Maya and others.

These findings indicate that the pursuit of algorithmic engagement often requires an unsustainable expenditure of emotional and creative energy, leading to cycles of anxiety and burnout within the creator community.

Discussion

The preceding findings detail the changes in a creator's motivation, a lack of transparency regarding the algorithm, their need to constantly self-adjust to any changes, and the issues that arise due to it.

Individuals to Dividuals: A Shift to Metric-Based Content Creation

The internet space has evolved from a libertarian utopia to an enclosed space captured by commercial interest (Tufekci, 2016). Social media platforms operate as sites of surveillance, corporate power, and control (Cobbe, 2020). However, surveillance and control of billions of users require a technological solution as human moderation is not feasible. The resultant solution was to reduce users to datapoints for algorithmic surveillance.

Deleuze's central thesis asserts that the disciplinary individual, defined by fixed physical institutions, has been replaced by the dividual, a fluid entity composed of codes, metrics, and data fragments constantly tracked within a network. The creator interviews reveal that this transformation is complete.

The creative self, initially driven by subjective, intrinsic motives, is quickly reduced to its objective, measurable codes. The creator becomes defined by their metrics (Shares/Comments/Saves) rather than the merit of their argument or art. As one creator noted, success is often reduced to "getting paid," and anxiety sets in when they catch themselves "checking my views and determining my worth based on that." This confirms that the creator has internalized the platform's code - their quantified value - as the primary definition of their self-worth. Creators view metrics not only as an indicator of income but also as a status symbol (Christin and Lewis, 2021). The constant focus on metrics due to fear of reduced engagement leads many creators to find it difficult to step away from their work, which, when coupled with the precarious nature of their work, leads to creator burnout and mental health issues (Howard, 2022), (Willment, 2022), (Carufel, 2022), and (Duffy, 2020).

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The selection of a content niche is also governed by this logic of codes and passwords. Maya's quick abandonment of the fashion/beauty niche for philosophy, solely because the latter was "doing very well getting good engagement," is an act of following the system's access permission. The platform grants access to visibility (views/reach) only to the data signature (the niche code) that successfully maximizes dwell time. The individual's desire is subordinated to the network's need for continuous and optimal data flow.

Enclosures to Modulations: The Continuous Adjustments by Creators

Deleuze describes control societies as operating through modulations - fluid, ever-changing systems that have replaced the fixed enclosures of disciplinary power. Unlike the factory, which had a defined start and stop time, the digital economy demands a continuous, unwinnable process of self-optimization.

The findings illustrate that the creative act has become an endless sequence of modulations:

Continuous Training: The creator must perpetually update their strategy (changing content length, adopting new formats like the "cinematic ratio," or deciding to post only "reactionary" content) based on real-time feedback. There is no point of rest where the creator's skills are "complete."

Fluidity of Form: The necessity to "simplify it and I have to kind of dumb it down a little" is the practical application of modulation. The creator is required to continuously adjust their message to accommodate the viewer's "fried attention span," a direct sacrifice of expressive nuance for algorithmic compliance.

Control through Freedom: Creators feel "free" to discuss any topic, but the continuous, invisible signal of the algorithm guides this choice. The control is not executed by locking the creator up, but by continuously altering the parameters of success, ensuring that the creator is always busy modulating their behavior to stay viable.

The aforementioned behavior is consistent with studies highlighting content creators from different platforms such as YouTube having to constantly adjust and adapt their video titles, thumbnails, keywords, and description ([Hödl and Myrach, 2023](#)). Social media requires continuous learning and adjustment to its evolving landscape of changing features ([Kwon et al., 2020](#)).

The Black Box and the Crisis of Perpetual Debt

The collapse of traditional institutions is replaced by subtler, more pervasive forms of control. The Black Box nature of the algorithm and the resulting "Follower Paradox" (Finding 2) are key mechanisms for maintaining a state of perpetual debt and crisis for the creator.

The system's inconsistency where high-effort videos fail while "random stupid videos" go viral is a crucial design feature. Similarly, Vishal recounts "how he does not understand it [the algorithm]... and how no one probably knows either." Vishal further states that he has to "constantly think what might work," while Jenifer echoes a similar sentiment where stability is denied because the creator is deprived of the knowledge required to create a predictable livelihood. A study from Tamil Nadu, India reflects similar insights regarding algorithmic opacity giving rise to ambiguity and unpredictability for content creators ([Divya and Kumar, 2025](#)).

The creators aim to maximize the number of audience reached by optimizing different engagement metrics such as "likes," "comments," and "shares." However, there is no official or definitive information regarding which metric is more important or impactful. Some studies ([Rosli et al., 2024](#)) ([Rivadeneira and Loor, 2024](#)) have focused on quantitative metrics such as number of likes, the day and time of posting, the type of post (single picture, carousel, video), the color tones in the visual media, etc. A different set of studies ([Gräve, 2019](#)) ([Etienne and Charton, 2024](#)) have indicated that a holistic understanding of qualitative metrics such as the sentiment in the comment section is to be considered in conjunction with the quantifiable metrics.

The "Follower Paradox" is the structural failure that guarantees this debt. By failing to deliver content to the existing, loyal audience, the platform ensures that the creator cannot rest on the security of their "follower base." Instead, they are forced into a constant, unwinnable competition for the "Explore" page audience. This means that every content post is an

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attempt to pay an unpayable debt - the debt of visibility - to the platform, rather than being delivered to a contracted audience. This perpetual crisis state is the primary engine for the anxiety, burnout, and unsustainability described by the participants.

Free-Floating Power and Internalized Panopticism

The control society is characterized by free-floating power diffused across networks rather than having a clear source (like a traditional boss or State). This necessitates an extreme form of self-policing, which the findings term strategic self-censorship (Finding 3).

The fear that drives this censorship is not merely the fear of a platform's moderation team, but the fear of a system that amplifies the toxic mob (leading to "slut shaming" or attracting "random creeps") and the fear of future economic exclusion by external entities. The double jeopardy of social media platforms is evident from their censorship of women's bodies while enabling their online abusers (Are, 2020).

The control is not coercion; it is anticipation. Because the rules of the algorithmic gaze are invisible, the creator must internalize the gaze, becoming their own Panopticon warden. This results in the compromise of authenticity and the strategic engagement in toxicity ("rage-baiting") to keep the numbers flowing. The power is so diffused and internalized that the creator actively participates in their own control, ensuring that their output is optimized for the continuous flow of information, regardless of the cost to their intellectual or emotional well-being.

The self-censorship has given rise to algospeak - a cryptic modification of sensitive words to get information across without an algorithmic penalty (Kabát et al., 2025). Creators make creative use of punctuation marks and emoticons to bypass a platform's perceived censorship or shadow-banning. Examples include replacing certain letters with punctuation marks such as the exclamation mark (!) or using the dollar sign (\$) to replace letter "l" and "s," respectively. Creators also make use of emoticons to mean to depict something wholly different as evident in the use of the "watermelon" emoticon to represent Palestine, as the political content creators feel that the platforms censor discussions related to Palestine, Gaza, and Israel.

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Main Theme	Subtheme(s)	Summary of Findings	Representative Evidence*	Interpretation
Shift from Intrinsic Motivation to Metric-Driven Creation	Initial Drive vs. Quantitative Imperatives Algorithmic Niche Selection	Creators begin with personal passion but quickly shift focus to quantitative benchmarks. Success is redefined by virality, leading creators to abandon authentic interests for niches that the algorithm validates through engagement feedback.	Maya: "only my Philosophical reels were doing very well... [I had to] stop making beauty reels completely". Faye: "well thought out" videos got 5k views vs. "random" videos getting 250k.	The subjective creative self is reduced to objective, measurable codes. Motivation becomes the ability to translate passion into an optimized, measurable output.
The Opaque Algorithmic Authority	Hierarchy of Engagement Metrics The Follower Paradox	The algorithm is experienced as an unpredictable "black box." Creators struggle with the "follower paradox," where content is not reliably shown to their own followers, necessitating a constant struggle for visibility on the 'Explore' page.	"consciously decided to follow me... [it is] very bizarre and unfair". Vishal: "does not understand it... and how no one probably knows either".	Algorithmic opacity maintains a state of "perpetual debt." Visibility is never secure, forcing creators into an unwinnable competition to pay the "debt of visibility".
Behavioral Modulation and Strategic Self-Censorship	Content Simplification Strategic Controversy Proactive Risk Management	Survival requires creators to "dumb down" content for "fried attention spans" or engage in "rage-baiting." They proactively censor their clothing, identity, and opinions to avoid audience backlash or professional judgment.	Maya: "simplify it and I have to kind of dumb it down a little". Riya: avoiding "too much skin" to avoid "random creeps" and "slut shaming".	Control is internalized through anticipation. Creators become their own "Panopticon wardens," modulating their authentic selves to ensure optimal data flow.
Mental Health and the Cost of Performance	Metric-Induced Anxiety Creator Burnout Impact of Toxicity	Continuous performance requirements lead to severe psychological costs. Creators base their self-worth on view counts and suffer from burnout and depressive	Riya: "checking my views and determining my worth based on that". All creators shared how abusive comments like "rape threats" led to depressive episodes.	The creator is transformed from an "individual" into a "dividual"—a fragmented entity defined and managed by data points, resulting

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		episodes triggered by algorithmic volatility and abusive audience comments.		in an unsustainable emotional expenditure.
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TABLE 2: Summary of findings

Comparisons with previous studies

Duffy and Meisner (Duffy and Meisner, 2023) highlight that social media creators are bound to the whims of the platform’s algorithm. They illustrate biased treatment of historically marginalized communities, necessitating self-censorship and circumvention techniques. Bucher (Bucher, 2012) discusses the divorce from a central inspector’s threat of visibility to a “threat of invisibility.” It is described as the threat of not being chosen by the algorithm requiring the creators to self-police themselves in-order to be selected by the algorithm.

The opaque algorithm makes creators dependent on “algorithmic folklore” (Savolainen, 2022) or “algorithmic gossip” (Bishop, 2019). Creators are in a continuous process of trial and error, making sense of the algorithm. The most popularly held belief is to “post, post, and post” (Duffy and Meisner, 2023), reflecting the belief that posting as frequently is rewarded and infrequent upload schedules are punished with lower views.

Implications

The findings underscore significant theoretical and ethical implications that necessitate a re-evaluation of platform governance and digital labor practices, particularly when viewed through the lens of Deleuze’s Societies of Control.

Theoretical Implications: The Exploitation of Productive Flux

The platform’s algorithms function as tools of capital accumulation, ensuring continuous user retention to maximize advertisement serving. This necessitates that the algorithm incentivizes constant change (modulation). The exploitation of creative labor occurs because the platform structurally prevents creators from achieving stable viewership (the Follower Paradox), thereby ensuring they remain in a state of perpetual crisis and insecurity. This precarity compels overwork and continuous self-optimization, achieving maximum output under maximum emotional and financial strain. The resulting psychological toll (anxiety, burnout, fusion of self-worth with metrics) is an externality of control, where the system’s efficiency is achieved by exploiting the creator’s well-being.

Policy Implications: Mandates for Structural Reform

The pervasive nature of algorithmic control mandates structural and policy interventions:

Algorithmic Auditing: Policy should require platforms to submit their key content ranking mechanisms to independent auditing to verify fairness and consistency of metric weighting. This eliminates the “black box” anxiety by providing creators with predictable rules.

Guaranteed Digital Rights: To mitigate the Follower Paradox, policy must establish a minimal digital delivery right, requiring platforms to guarantee a baseline content delivery to existing followers. This provides a foundational level of security for income and reduces the compulsion for overwork.

Creator Control over Safety: To combat the burden of self-censorship and audience toxicity, platforms must be compelled to grant creators granular control over safety algorithms, allowing them to proactively filter out accounts with histories of harassment. This shifts the burden of policing from the individual laborer to the structural mechanism of control.

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Conclusions

This study, framed by Deleuze's concept of "Society of control," finds that the social media platforms work as an invisible, continuous coercing mechanism that transforms content creators' creative expression through an engineered "black box" environment. The empirical analysis of the responses of the participants confirms the theoretical supposition that the "individual," signified by creators' perception of their identity, worth and their own autonomy to employ their creativity has been supplanted by the "dividual" or the creator whose identity, worth, and creative judgement are systematically broken down into data points and metrics; whose intrinsic value lies in continuous optimization. This phenomenon is not just an incidental feature but rather an intrinsic part of the economic aspect of such social media platforms.

This is achieved through a nexus of three interwoven conditions that underpin these platforms. The first condition is the displacement of intrinsic or original motivation in the subject, form or manner of content creation by motivation through engagement metrics - measured through views, likes, comments, and shares. This displacement changes the nature of creative production from an act of expression to a continuous performance for perceived algorithmic reward. The findings show that the creators do not see this shift as an external pressure; rather, they come to see it as an internalized aspiration - as a quantifiable measure of their own value.

The second condition is of the opacity of the algorithmic structure, identified by Cotter and Divon et al. as "black box" gaslighting' or "platform gaslighting," which denies the creators the epistemic basis to develop a stable professional strategy. The "Follower paradox" of the content not being reliably pushed toward even those who agree and opt to engage with a creator ensures a situation of perpetual insecurity that compels the creator to overproduce and overextend themselves in the process.

The third condition is that of tethered labor, which Liang has described as a condition where the worker bears all risks while the platform retains all structural privileges. The first two conditions lead to behavioral modifications and modulations (such as content simplification, strategic engagement of controversy, and proactive self-censorship), which create the third condition.

The Indian context adds additional levels of complexity to this equation. Factors such as much of the economic gains being tied to a small tier of top content creators, lack of coherent regulatory framework, unequal algorithmic legibility and moderation of India's diverse linguistic community, lead to the burden of tethered labor to fall unevenly towards mid and lower tier creators who form the majority of the upcoming market. This study affirms that Global North scholarship around algorithmic coercion is not uniformly applicable in Global South contexts like India. The additional context around socio-economic and cultural conditions subverts it, creating new, more acute forms of coercion.

This study, though rich in phenomenological insight, does not support generalizable conclusions due to the small sample size and limited platform choice (i.e., Instagram). Future research could look towards expanding the sample size, as well as platform range to include other popular and emerging platforms within the Indian social media content market, to better capture whether the mechanisms identified here hold across these different platforms, despite differences in their algorithmic and monetization structures. Furthermore, future studies can benefit from a more longitudinal tracking of same creators over longer time periods, which would better highlight whether their adaptive strategies actually hold against algorithmic coercion or just delay the impact, and whether the tethered labor condition of the content creators becomes worse as creators become more dependent on their platforms for income. Similarly, there is a lack of research around the differential impact of algorithmic coercion in terms of linguistic and regional diversity in India. Finally, there is also scope to look into comparative cross-national studies of Global South countries, comparing the experience of Indian content creators with that of other major Global South social media content markets like Brazil, Indonesia, and others, which would allow for a disaggregation of the universal features of algorithmic coercion from those that are determined by the local context of the market. Such comparative studies would be essential for developing a meaningful adaptation of the theory of algorithmic coercion in the Global South context.

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The limitations of the study include a small and homogeneous sample, self-selection bias in purposive sampling, lack of demographic diversity, limitations in capturing long-term perception of algorithmic coercion and the dependence on participants' perception. The homogenous nature of sample leads to a lack of generalizability. Self-selection bias may have resulted in a sample that is more sensitive and knowledgeable toward the platform's functioning than an average creator while their inputs illuminate the study with a lack of the platform's side on the matter.

Appendices

Semi-structured Interview Questions

INTRODUCTION

1. Tell me about your journey as a content creator.
2. What kind of content do you create?
3. Can you tell me what it entails?
4. What is your niche if any?
5. What motivates you to create?
6. As a content creator what is your goal (views, income, other)? (or)
7. As a content creator what does success look like to you?

EXPLORING DECISIONS

1. Can you walk me through your content creation process - from ideation to pressing post? (Since the start of your journey, how would you say, you have incorporated changes in your content?)
 2. What motivated (lead) you to make those changes?
 3. Were they fruitful?
 4. What resources did you follow, if at all,
 5. Were they useful?
 6. If you followed your intuition, can you walk me through the process?
 7. How do you decide on a topic (idea) to pursue and what to avoid? What made you pursue one (this/these) topic over another?
 8. Can you walk me through the thought process?
- [IF THERE IS NO TRIGGER] 8.1. Did you pursue a topic thinking it will perform well or followed a trend in your niche?
- [OR] 8.2. What are some of the trends in your niche?
- 8.2.1. Have you ever followed them? Why/why not?
- 8.2.2. What has been your experience following a trend? Did they perform better? Why/why not?
- [ALTERNATE TO ABOVE] Have you ever actively decided not a pursue a topic of interest?

SELF-EXPRESSION & CENSORSHIP

1. Have you ever created a video that you were passionate about but hesitated or decided not to post?

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2. Can you tell me more about that? (Main reasons, loss of views, deemed too controversial, possible backlash)

3. Have you ever had a video "unexpectedly" underperform?

3.1. Do you feel you have ever been shadowbanned?

3.1.1 Why do you think so?

[IF NO SPECIFIC ANSWER] 3.1.2. Could the reason be that something controversial in the zeitgeist was mentioned that Instagram deemed not ok to boost?

3.1.3. What could that be?

3.1.4. What did it feel like? (Powerless, confused, anxious, etc.)

4. Have you ever had a video taken down by the platform?

4.1. Can you tell me about the video and its content?

4.2. Why do you think it got removed?

[PROBE] 4.3. What was the official reason?

4.4. Do you agree with it? Why/why not?

5. Have you ever removed a video after posting (barring errors like typos, mistakes, etc.)?

5.1. Can you tell me the reason?

5.2. After that have you stopped making videos on "that" specific topic which led the arousal of the "reason" for deletion in the first place?

ENGAGEMENT

Note: With respect to engagement (likes, comments, saves, and shares)

1. What can you tell me about their comparative importance?

2. Is one more important than other according to the rest?

3. Have you ever actively tried to create a video trying to maximize that metric?

3.1. Walk me through the thought process (or What made you do this)?

3.2. Since then, has this "technique" been a staple in your videos?

3.3. Does it still work?

4. Do you think these changes helped you in your self-expression?

CLOSING/DIRECT QUESTIONS

1. Looking back, how has your experience with content creation and production changed?

As the interview closes, you might have noticed that we are researching about creator's experience with algorithms and how it can invisibly dictate what content to create.

2. So, in that topic have you ever found yourself leaning toward what the algorithm will like than what you actually want to create?

Any instances of

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- (a) self-censorship
- (b) trying to please the algorithm
- (c) trying to circumvent platform barriers through means such as using a different word to means a different thing or a watered-down version of the word?
3. Finally, if you could give some sort of feedback to the people who create or are in charge of this platform and algorithm, what would that be?

Demographic details of the participants

Table 3 presents the demographic details of the participants included in this study.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Region	Years Active	Follower Count (approx)	Genre
Maya	Female	26	India	1	23,000	Philosophy
Jenifer	Female	28	India	6	40,000	Fashion
Riya	Female	23	Canada	6	37,000	Fashion, Travel, Lifestyle
Faye	Female	25	India	3	1,000	Philosophy, Education
Vishal	Male	26	Ireland	1	7,000	Politics, Social commentary

TABLE 3: Demographic details of participants

Additional Information

Author Contributions

All authors have reviewed the final version to be published and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Concept and design: Ritam Talukdar, Khushi K. Shukla

Acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data: Ritam Talukdar, Khushi K. Shukla, Namrata Sharma

Drafting of the manuscript: Ritam Talukdar, Khushi K. Shukla, Namrata Sharma

Critical review of the manuscript for important intellectual content: Khushi K. Shukla

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Human subjects: Consent was obtained or waived by all participants in this study. **Animal subjects:** All authors have confirmed that this study did not involve animal subjects or tissue. **Conflicts of interest:** In compliance with the ICMJE uniform disclosure form, all authors declare the following: **Payment/services info:** All authors have declared that no financial support was received from any organization for the submitted work. **Financial relationships:** All authors have

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Data Availability Statements

The datasets (and/or code) supporting this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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