FROM BUZZFEED CREATOR TO (IN)DEPENDENT YOUTUBER - MANAGING PRECARIOUS LABOUR THROUGH GOSSIP

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In 2019, Buzzfeed announced plans to make 220 employees redundant (Bennett, 2019). In the wake of the cuts, other creators decided to leave the company of their own volition calling the management of Buzzfeed out for toxic business practices and disregard of labour rights (Kludt & Phung, 2019). Several well known Buzzfeed Creators moved on to an autonomous career as YouTube creators hoping that the previously acquired audience would migrate with them to support their company independent channel as an entrepreneurial career move. While this is often represented as a move towards independence by the creators, research in cultural production (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Postigo, 2016) has shown that the creators are always platform-dependent and dependent on their YouTube public (Mniestri & Gekker, 2020) for viability. Therefore, we question whether being an (in)dependent YouTuber would be more precarious than being an employed Buzzfeed creator. How does the migration from Buzzfeed to YouTube creator offer both independence and a host of new precarious contingencies to creators?

Theoretical Framework

The circulation of user-generated video content has had a telling influence on our understanding of digital culture; yet, YouTube has evaded the scope of much digital platform research (Burgess & Green, 2018; Rieder et al. 2018). Similarly, research into the precarious nature of cultural production has often left creators out despite the ongoing professionalization of the creator industry. Furthermore, current research often looks at independent creators entering the industry as laypersons while there is little research on creators that move from traditional employment to (in)dependent content creation. While precarity has become a buzzword in the creative industries (McRobbie,

2016), it is most often associated with financial insecurity referring to limited employment opportunities, the growth of contract work and freelancing (Kalleberg, 2009; Campell & Burgess, 2018). However, precarity ought to be understood as a more holistic problem impacting creators' mental health, work-life balance and live narratives (Morgan & Nelligan, 2018; Morini et al., 2014). Research on the "architectures of digital labour" (Postigo, 2016) points to the exploitation of creators, due to a lack of unionisation and, hence, labour protection, and the monetization of intimate labour enforcing mental health issues, leading to an overall precarisation of the industry. Numerous prominent Buzzfeed creators, including members of LadyLike and Try Guys, have created "Why I left Buzzfeed" videos calling out the company for pushing overwork, intimate content, and disregarding labour rights. Taking this into consideration, we are referring to precarity as a framework to parse the complex shifts inherent in the migration from employee creating content to becoming a self-employed creator.

Methodology

Contributions to the field of qualitative YouTube studies have preferred content analysis and on/off-line ethnography to elucidate the concerns and struggles of creators (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Burgess & Green, 2018; Bishop, 2018). Considering existing literature, we first attempt to capture cultural, economic, and social processes by reviewing relevant popular literature and interviews with Buzzfeed executives[1]. Additionally, we are situating a content and discourse analysis of 17 'Why I Left Buzzfeed' videos by former employees turned YouTubers within academic and popular discourse. We understand these videos as potential sources of 'gossip' (Bishop, 2018) defined as "loose, unmethodological talk that is generative" (p. 2590). As Bishop points out, gossip allows creators to negotiate platform visibility collectively, despite the uneven power distribution between creators and the platforms. We hypothesize that gossip can be beneficial to ex-Buzzfeed creators by building on their Buzzfeed association to boost their algorithmic visibility. Additionally, gossip is a valuable form of knowledge exchange for creators to stay informed on discourse, support one another, and communicate their own perspectives on former Buzzfeed content to followers. Gossip also allows us as researchers to break through the black box of YouTube as a workplace to better comprehend precarity as multifaceted. Thus, we coded the collected videos according to creators' gossip on financial, emotional, and temporal precarity. Additionally, we used the module "Video Info and Comments" (Rieder, 2021) from the Youtube Data Tools to crawl the video comments and analyse whether there is a consistent set of users across these videos.

Results

Creators are walking a tightrope to balance financial security with emotional well-being, and sustainability of their work-life balance both as Buzzfeed employees or YouTube

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[1] Including CEO Jonah Peretti, publisher Dao Nguyen and CCO Carole Robinson among others. Although we shall not analyse these materials word for word, it is essential to acknowledge them.

creators. The imaginary of independence is a false friend as creators, both as employed and self-employed, are dependent on platform governance for visibility. While Buzzfeed as an employer seems to provide more financial stability, creators discredit this notion referring to the massive employee cuts in the last years. Similarly, creators call out Buzzfeed's toxic workplace culture for causing mental health issues but simultaneously question YouTube's platform as a 'healthy' alternative. They ponder their intimate labour to sustain their pre-existent following, creation fatigue, and algorithmic precarity (Duffy, 2020) to win the visibility game openly with their audiences. Hereby, they are gaining leverage with their viewers against YouTube's opaque platform governance, arguably bolstering public support for a more sustainable career on YouTube. In other words, this public performance of vulnerability is an investment in a less precarious future on the platform, that is not contingent on the unreliable algorithmic economy within YouTube but on a perceivably more long-lasting affective relationship with their audience alleviating their temporal precarity. Future research could aim to incorporate the perspectives of creators, employers such as Buzzfeed and YouTube officials through interviews to compare their narratives around precarious employment.

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