MAKING A MEDIA CAREER ON AND BEYOND YOUTUBE: DIVERSITY IN PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES OF YOUTUBE CREATORS

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Introduction

YouTube as part of a growing social media entertainment (SME) industry has gathered global content creators under its platform (Cunningham and Craig, 2019). The platform has taken various steps to professionalise, formalise and regulate the field of user-generated content (UGC) such as introducing the Content ID system for copyright infringements, supporting the formation of multi-channel networks, creating YouTube Studios, welcoming professionally generated content (PGC) from traditional media industries, and introducing its Partner Program for revenue sharing (Burgess and Green, 2018). Along with these steps blurring the boundary between UGC and PGC, self-professionalised YouTube creators have integrated into an emerging creative workforce of SME. The industrialisation and professionalisation of SME have created the assumption of a formalisation of professional identity as an influencer (van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021), a social media creator (Cunningham and Craig, 2019), a blogger (Hopkins, 2019), a vlogger (Burgess and Green, 2009), or more specifically a YouTuber (Lange, 2019). Contrary to this assumption, I argue that there is a divergence from fixed categories as it is not possible to fix permanently or define conclusively the professional identity as a YouTuber because conditions of content creator labour are precarious.

Making a media career from YouTubing is, therefore, a risky endeavour for creators as not all of them manage to secure a liveable income. First, creators working outside of standard employment relations are deprived of usual benefits such as stable income, insurance, and sick leave. This particularly stems from the way YouTube structurally frames its creators as independent contractors who are bounded by "an entrepreneurial competition for audience and resources" (Caplan and Gillespie, 2020, p. 4). Furthermore, creators experience "algorithmic precarity" (Duffy, 2020) stemming from non-transparent and changeable nature of the algorithms which determines video contents' visibility on the platform (Bishop, 2019) and "platform precarity" within the competitive field of SME (Cunningham and Craig, 2019). While acknowledging these

aspects of YouTube labour, this paper investigates how creators who engage in self-governance as risk-bearing creative agents form their professional identities inside or outside YouTube careers and illuminates the diversity and ambivalence in their professional identities due to the precarious nature of their work.

Methodology

This paper presents findings from my doctoral research which examines creative digital labour practices of Irish and Turkish YouTube creators by focusing on a diversity of professional identities among the research participants and platformisation and localisation of precarity experiences of creators. The data presented in this paper is collected through semi-structured interviews with 9 Turkish creators, 6 of whom were male and 3 were female, and 7 Irish creators, 4 of whom were male and 3 were female, between December 2019 and June 2020 and an observational study in one of the production houses (PHs) in Istanbul. The research participants, identified through snowball sampling, consist of self-professionalised or aspiring independent creators, those who are engaged in paid employment in PHs as part of a production team and have recognisable job titles as media workers as well as owners/partners of such PHs. This diversity is also evident in their channels' subscriber numbers ranging from 1K to 3M and content genres such as entertainment, beauty & lifestyle, vlogs, tutorials, film reviews, and interviews with celebrities. This diversity was illuminating to identify the differences in how they form their professional identities while also exploring their shared work culture. In addition, the study benefited from the walkthrough method to identify the platform affordances and to understand the platform's vision, operating model, and governance (Light, Burgess, and Duguay, 2018). This method informed my interview questions and helped me to put subjective interpretations of creators into the context of the platform affordances and regulatory frameworks and consider how these factors shape or constrain the activity of creators.

Findings

As part of the SME industry, the research participants with different educational backgrounds, talent, skills, and motivations have slightly different but at times similar identifications regarding their practices of YouTubing. While all have looked to or are looking to monetise their activity, there are variations in the professional identities they claim. Their self-descriptions include not only YouTuber but also freelance videographer, entrepreneur, manager, content editor, producer, production assistant, and production coordinator. They also work under various types of employment categories including self-professionalised YouTubers, freelancers, company owners/partners and employees. Overall, there are various factors affecting how they describe their practices of YouTubing which range from their motivations to their commitment to their channels, their income sources, the type of media production they engage, and their career goals. All these problematise the assumption of the increasing formalisation of a professional identity as YouTuber or content creator in the SME industry.

Some participants describe their practices "as 'non-work' that needs to be supported through 'work' or another source of income" such as paid employment or freelancing

since they are unable to monetise adequately their creative outputs on YouTube (Taylor, 2018, p. 334). YouTubing, therefore, remains a labour of love as they do not actively seek to acquire a professional identity of YouTuber. Some creators are committed to the activity they love in pursuit of becoming a professional YouTuber, despite describing YouTubing as a hobby. For self-professionalised creators who secure a liveable income, YouTubing emerges as "a career in its own right" (Ashton and Patel, 2018). Lastly, for some participants working in PHs, their professional identities come from their role in the processes of media production. Thus, focusing on the nature of how work is organised in YouTubing provides a valuable perspective on the diversity of professional identities.

Given this complexity, the precarious nature of YouTubing also creates unstable identifications with the participants' practices of YouTubing. Self-managing this uncertainty requires the flexibility to shift between different professional identities as well as types of employment categories. These shifts are not stuck inside YouTube careers, though. YouTubing as an emerging profession in the SME industry has clearly some established ties with more traditional media industries. For some creators, the end goal of their creative practice is to have a career inside the formalised, established media industry and thereby YouTube is a stepping-stone; for others, formal media work is the stepping-stone to a YouTube career. More importantly, most of them maintain the possibility of moving between inside and outside YouTube careers as a risk management strategy.

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