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COMPETENCY PRESCRIPTIONS BY SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS AND THE RISE OF ORGANIZATIONAL PROFESSIONALISM AMONG CONTENT CREATORS

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Introduction

Social media platforms have changed the media ecology and created new occupations, such as content creators (CCs). Previous studies have provided valuable insights into the development, practices, and circumstances of this occupation, though not through the lens of the sociology of professions, a field capable of elucidating how organizations shape the work and identity of new occupations. To address this gap, this article employs Julia Evetts' (2013) seminal formulation of organizational professionalism to investigate the discursive articulation of competencies among platforms focused on managing CCs toward business objectives.

Evetts' initial ideal-type is occupational professionalism, a discourse based on a shared normative system of values and beliefs acquired through education, training, and socialization. This is crucial for professional identity. Organizational professionalism, in contrast, is a management discourse that disciplines workers through occupational identity and self-control mechanisms, such as standardization, goal setting, and performance indicators. Organizations define professionalism as a set of virtues and principles that guide workers in achieving business goals while capitalizing on their desire to be recognized as professionals (Evetts, 2013).

Evetts (2006) built on Fournier's (1999) pioneering approach to professionalism as a disciplinary mechanism, regulating autonomous workers' conduct by articulating competencies and appropriate behavior, thereby indirectly governing actions and identity. From this perspective, organizational professionalism for CCs involves a set of

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competencies, namely, the achievements, outputs, or deliverables generated when individuals mobilize and combine relevant resources to fulfill professional demands in a particular context (Le Boterf, 2003). Consequently, our research questions are

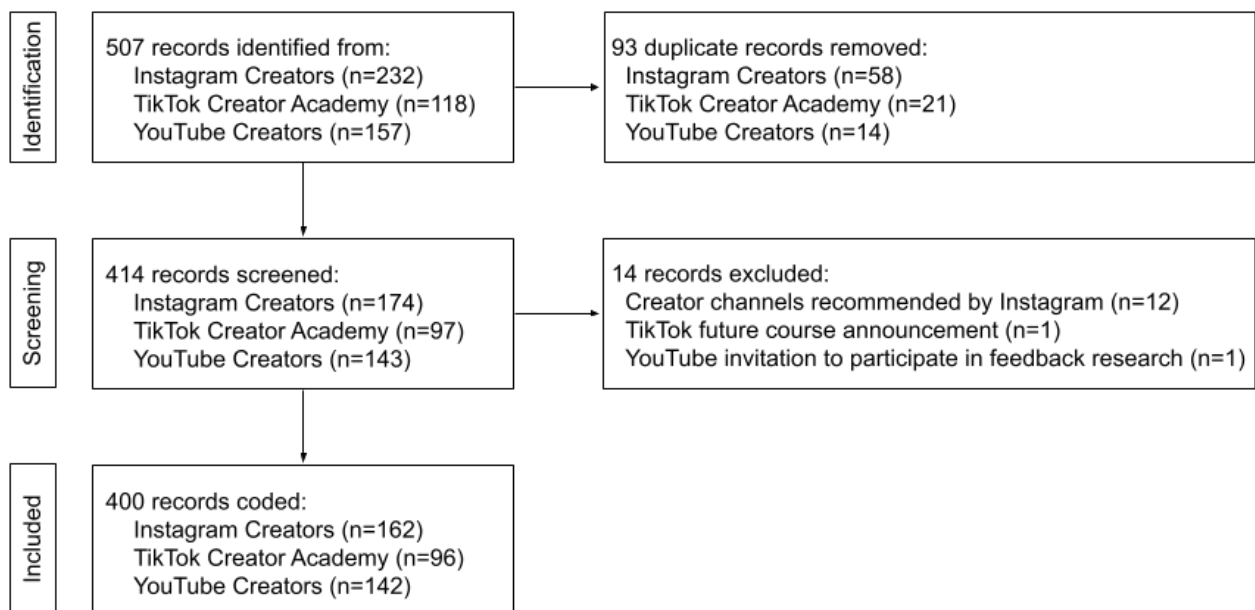
RQ1: What competencies comprise the professionalism prescribed by social media platforms for content creators?

RQ2: How do these competencies benefit content creators and social media platforms?

Research Design

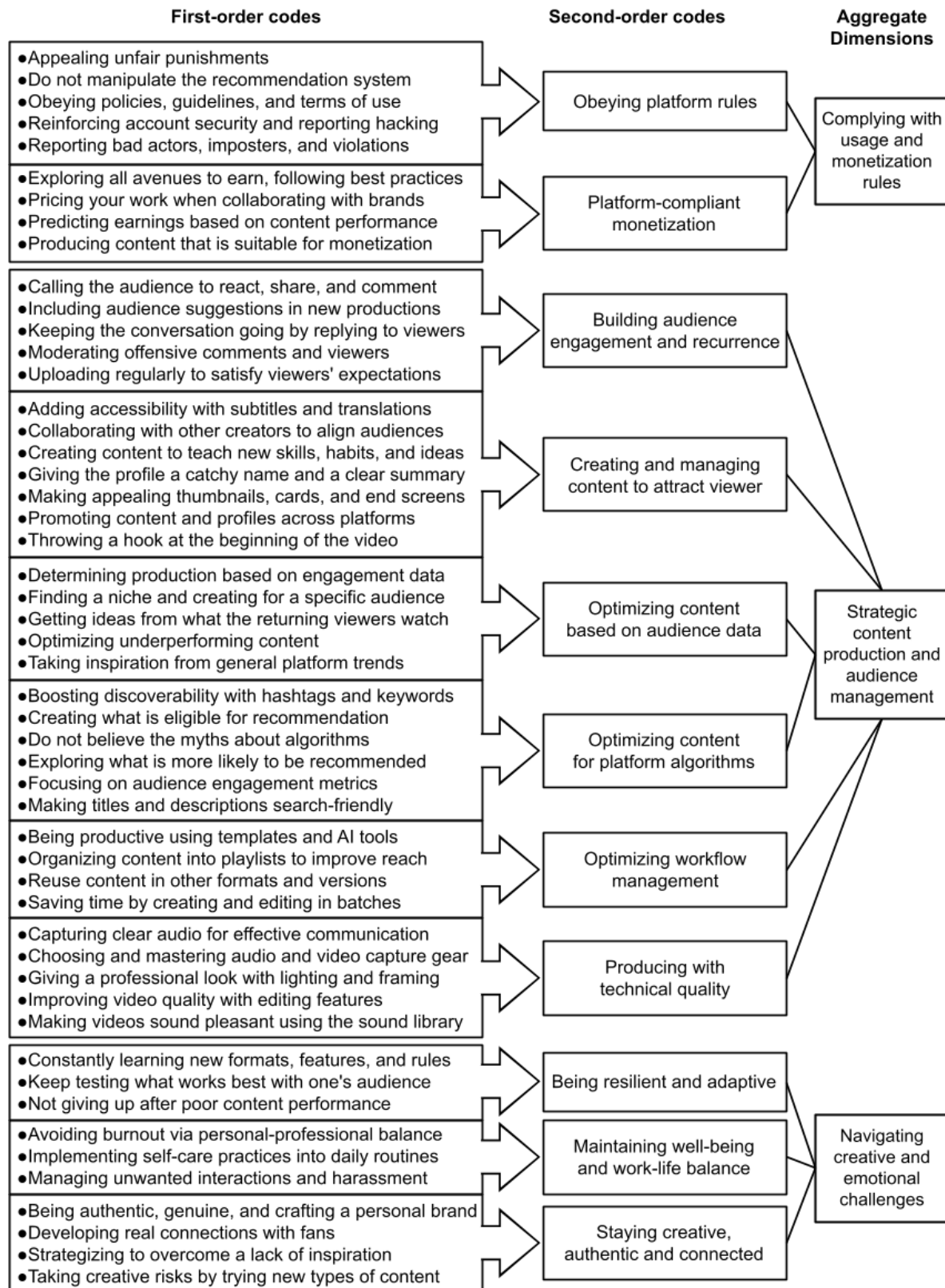
We collected all text units and video transcripts found in Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube sessions designed to instruct CCs (creators.instagram.com/, tiktok.com/creator-academy/, youtube.com/creators) on September 30 and October 5, 2024. The 507 text and transcription units obtained were uploaded into an online interactive spreadsheet. After removing duplicates and irrelevant data, we coded 400 records (figure 1).

Figure 1. Document selection and inclusion process



We applied a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) to develop a model through interactive rounds of data construction and analysis. Two authors independently conducted initial and focused coding and category definition in three single-platform rounds. Intercoder agreement solidified the framework after each round. The third researcher reviewed the codes, categories, and competencies described in single-platform rounds and within a unified analysis framework. After initial coding, 52 competencies were refined into 11 focused codes and grouped into three dimensions. We structured the data following Gioia et al.'s (2013) recommendations (figure 2).

Figure 2. Data structure



Discussion

We identified three dimensions of competencies that comprise the professional discourse of platforms. These interdependent levels of normative, practical, and emotional competencies serve both the platforms' business objectives and the CCs' careers, as well as revealing the material and discursive arrangements from which the occupation emerges. The aggregate dimensions are

1) "Complying with usage and monetization rules" refers to the interpretation, compliance with, and strategic adaptation to platform policies and monetization rules, maintaining self-vigilance to avoid visibility-damaging penalties, and aligning monetization efforts with best practices.

For platforms, this dimension enables indirectly governing work through regulation, threatening violators with invisibility and promising algorithmic visibility to those who adhere (Araujo, 2021; Pithan & Closs, 2024). As Jarrett (2022) notes, policies, codes, and resources guide behaviors similar to task allocation in a Taylorist office.

For creators, compliance offers short-term benefits but under precarious and constantly shifting conditions (Cunningham & Craig, 2021). The changing rules lead to continuous relearning and insecurity, and compliance requirements clash with productivity demands, leading to precarity, financial uncertainty, and exhaustion (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020; Duffy et al., 2021; Glatt, 2022; Villegas-Simón et al., 2022).

2) "Strategic content production and audience management" encompasses the technical and strategic competencies needed to create and manage content. The goal is to maximizing visibility, engagement, and monetization opportunities and building the positive reputation that partner brands want.

This dimension benefits the platform's business by increasing data extraction and network effects (Srnicek, 2017). Platforms maintain disproportionate value extraction, rewarding a minority (Giblin & Doctorow, 2022) while pushing creators toward productivity. Furthermore, digital celebrities who spread positive career myths inspire aspiring creators (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017).

These competencies drive content reach and monetization opportunities, yet algorithms mediate and distribute rewards unevenly. The need for quality standards, consistency, algorithmic understanding, and audience interaction (Bishop, 2019; Bucher, 2018; Cotter, 2019; Karhawi & Prazeres, 2022; Ma & Kou, 2021; O'Meara, 2019) feels like overworking is a job requirement. These demands erode creative autonomy and increase dependence on opaque algorithmic systems (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017).

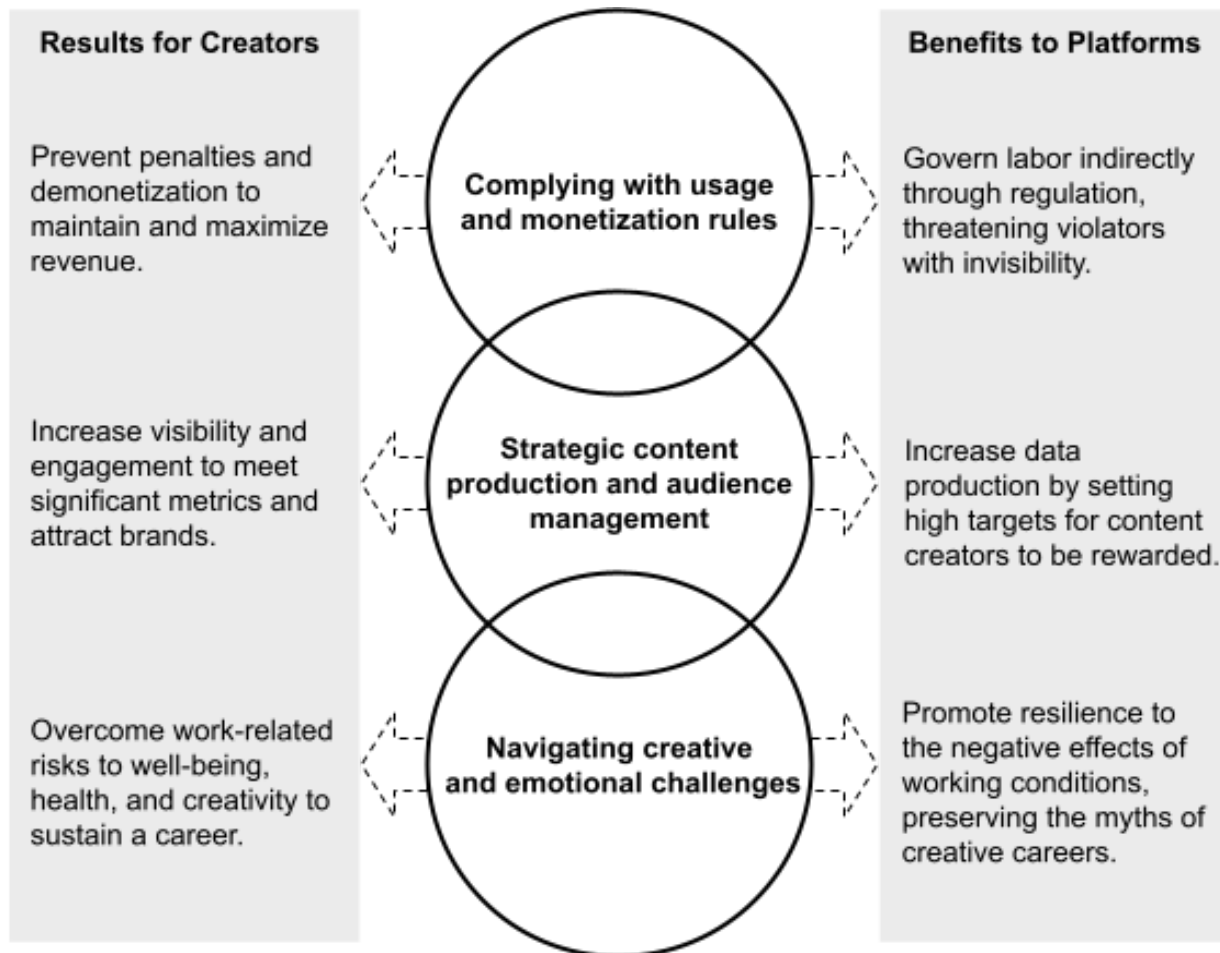
3) "Navigating creative and emotional challenges" involves developing self-awareness, emotional, and relational competencies to cope with work-related contradictions and obstacles and still maintain health. This includes presenting a creative and authentic image, connecting with the audience, and remaining resilient in the face of criticism, uncertainty, and frequent changes.

Encouraging self-care and resilience, platforms acknowledge the struggles and suffering of CCs yet shift responsibility onto them to resolve issues related to working conditions. Platforms define contextual risks as inherent career challenges that require professional competencies to overcome. This approach ensures a supply of resilient workers who present themselves as entrepreneurs (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017).

For creators, these prescriptions offer tools for self-accountability and coping with the structural contradictions of work and their consequences. Since what leads to success (engagement, productivity, authenticity) can also lead to stress, anxiety, and burnout (Azayem et al., 2024; Mileros et al., 2025), emotional labor is both a career survival strategy and a hidden cost of creative work, reinforcing the individualization of responsibility typical of platform economies. Competence in this dimension implies bearing the heavy demands of the other two.

Taken together, these competencies are prerequisites for a career as a content creator while also normalizing overwork, self-monitoring, and uncertainty. For platforms, the discourse of professionalism is a governance instrument, a means of managing work that leads to the achievement of business goals (figure 3).

Figure 3. Social media platforms' competencies framework



Conclusion

Organizational professionalism, as a Weberian ideal type, serves as a heuristic construct for analyzing occupational history. Its use contributes to understanding how platforms establish expected "professional" behaviors and thus shape CCs' occupational practices and identities.

Examining how platforms define professionalism denaturalizes their narratives of autonomy and entrepreneurship, revealing how work is managed through competency requirements. This approach highlights platforms' control and discipline mechanisms, the obscuring of their agency and responsibilities regarding CCs' working conditions, and the contradictions and tensions inherent in platformized creative work.

To extend the understanding of the impact of social media platforms on existing professions, we suggest that future research study CCs with highly institutionalized primary professions, such as medical influencers (Ng et al., 2024). We also recommend investigating how platforms' practices resonate with the competency-based management model.

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