CONTENT CREATORS' BELIEF SYSTEMS AND THEIR SOCIAL MEDIA ECOSYSTEMS

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Introduction

Content creators have become essential players and disruptors in social media ecosystems and society at large. By examining how content creators make sense of these ecosystems, this article offers a conceptual and analytical framework that broadens the scope of existing analyses of creators' content strategies and activities. Using cognitive, behavioral, and experiential factors, we investigate the belief systems of creators. Creators' belief systems are examined in relation to different facets of social media ecosystems, representing both mundane and supernatural sense-making approaches. We illustrate how different belief systems affect the choices made by content creators and impact the ecosystem as a whole. Our paper contributes to the field of creator research in three ways: we sketch and conceptualize the social media ecosystem to examine content creators (Figure 1); we propose a visual mapping methodological approach drawing from critical cartography studies and cognitive mapping to explore creators' beliefs about the different elements of this ecosystem; we provide an analytical proposal that considers the potential for mundane and supernatural beliefs among creators within their social media ecosystems.

Content creators' social media ecosystems

Social media platforms are organized as ecosystems (Gawer & Cusumano, 2014), and within these ecosystems, content creators are essential generators of value (Lari-Williams, 2020). Previous platform ecosystem approaches have served to map the power of the Big Five platform corporations, their services, and relevance within the ecosystem (Van Dijck et al., 2018); the media ecosystem approach has also been used

to analyze large-scale shifts in information/attention flows considering the role of platforms and algorithmic recommendation (Zuckerman, 2021). Companies have used the ecosystem approach to understand the flows of resources among actors in a social media ecosystem (Business Model Toolbox, 2023).

We synthesize these different approaches to propose a social media ecosystem model suitable for platforms employing hierarchical, centralized recommender systems (e.g., TikTok or Instagram). Our proposal adopts Kapoor et al.'s (2021) socio-technical approach to platform ecosystems, encompassing four dimensions: technical aspects, tasks, actors, and structures (Figure1).
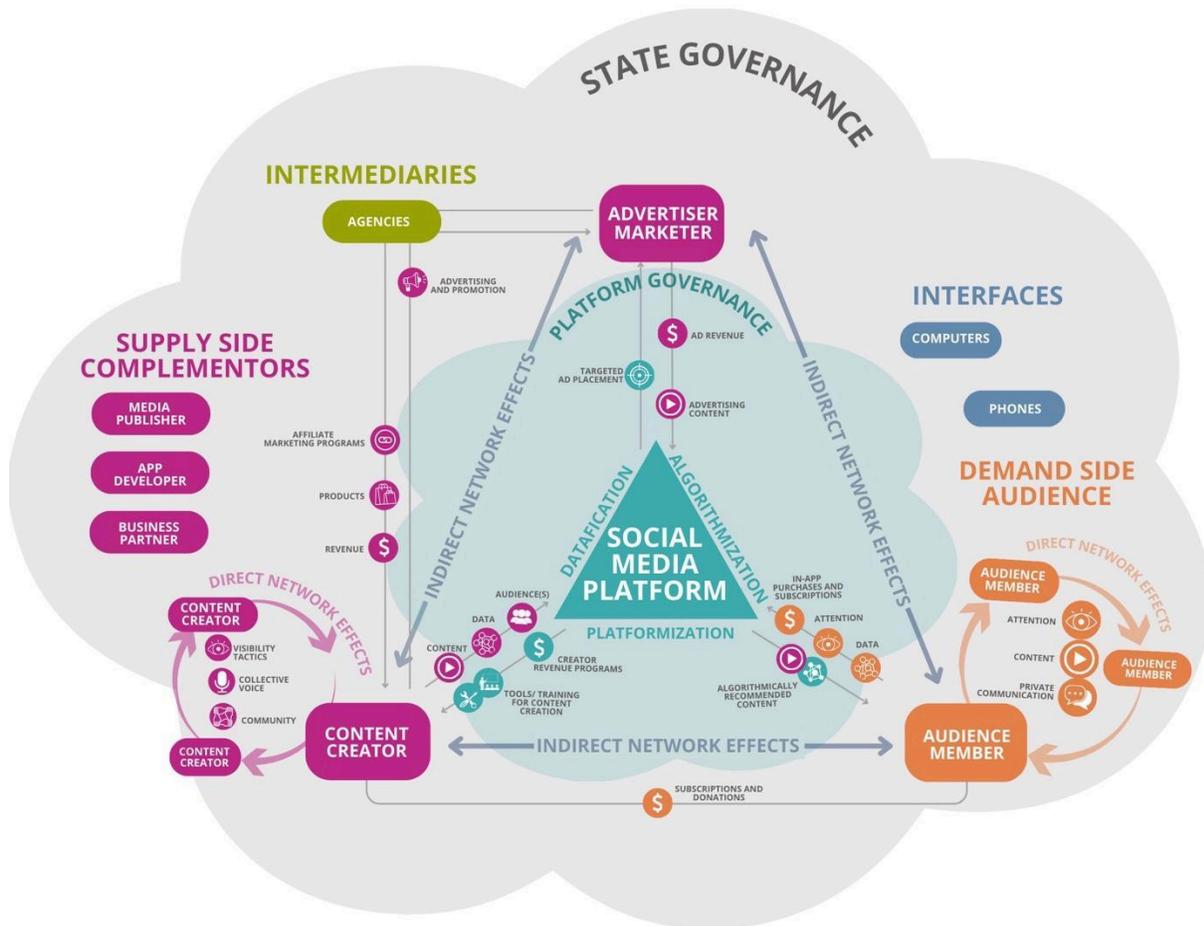

Figure 1: Sketch of the ecosystem of a social media platform such as TikTok and Instagram. (Own illustration, adapted from Business Model Toolbox (2023), Kapoor et al. (2021), Latzer (2022)).

We define the social media ecosystem as the "bounded, multi-sided network of sociotechnical structures (e.g., actors, elements, systems) that enable and constrain certain behaviors, relationships and dependencies between them through their design and/or regulation" (Jaramillo-Dent & Latzer, 2025). In our proposal, the social media ecosystem approach enables mapping existing relationships of power, responsibility,

and control between the actors involved, from the perspective of creators and their beliefs.

Our outline of a social media ecosystem enables the exploration of the role of creators' belief systems about different elements of this ecosystem, and to examine the impact of beliefs on the whole system.

Mundane and supernatural sense-making and content creators

Creator studies' research has used different terms and approaches to explore content creators' activities and sense-making within the domain of the mundane, as a reflection of broader societal disruptions of digitalization. Three foci that are especially important to the field of communication have been explored in creator research: content creation as work —e.g., platformization of cultural production, influencer economies (Hund, 2023; Poell et al., 2022)— content creation as information production —e.g., generating original content, resisting content moderation (Are, 2022; Cunningham & Craig, 2021)— content creation as (para)sociality —e.g., perceived interconnectedness as a form of digital parasociality between influencers/followers, context collapse (Abidin, 2015).

Existing research on online behaviors also reflects significant interest in the supernatural sense-making dimensions of digital media from the perspective of the tech industry, users, and to some extent, of creators. For example, the characterization of tech industry discourse as a magical "conjuration of algorithms" has been pointed as a strategy to avoid criticism and to mislead the public about these socio-technical systems (Nagy & Neff, 2024). Users' transcendent experiences with digital media (Dale et al., 2020; Oliver et al., 2018); users' sense-making of social media recommender systems through algorithmic conspirituality (Cotter et al., 2022); users' implicit or invisible everyday religion (Latzer, 2022); and users' perceptions of being 'blessed by the algorithm' (Singler, 2020).

Creator researchers have explored phenomena that can benefit from the twofold (mundane/supernatural) approach to sense-making that are relevant to our proposal, such as creators' beliefs about the uncertain nature of their work (Glatt, 2023; Poell et al., 2022) and the ways in which they navigate this uncertainty (Duffy & Meisner, 2023). Religion-like functions of content creation have been examined by analyzing Instagram content to determine whether creators present themselves as deserving of devotion (Clarke, 2020). Similarly, influencers' hypervisibility has been argued to make them "invocable" within theorizations of invocational media, a term closely related to prayer, conjuration or petition towards God, magic or other non-human agents in instances of need (Chesher, 2023). There are many options to explore supernatural sense-making among creators and we focus on three aspects that are recurrent in creator research: understanding the unexplainable; coping with uncertainty; and experiencing transcendence.

The exploration of creators' belief systems also enables a better understanding of mundane and supernatural dimensions of sense-making, which relate to the bigger picture of socio-technical disruptions of digitalization (Figure 2).
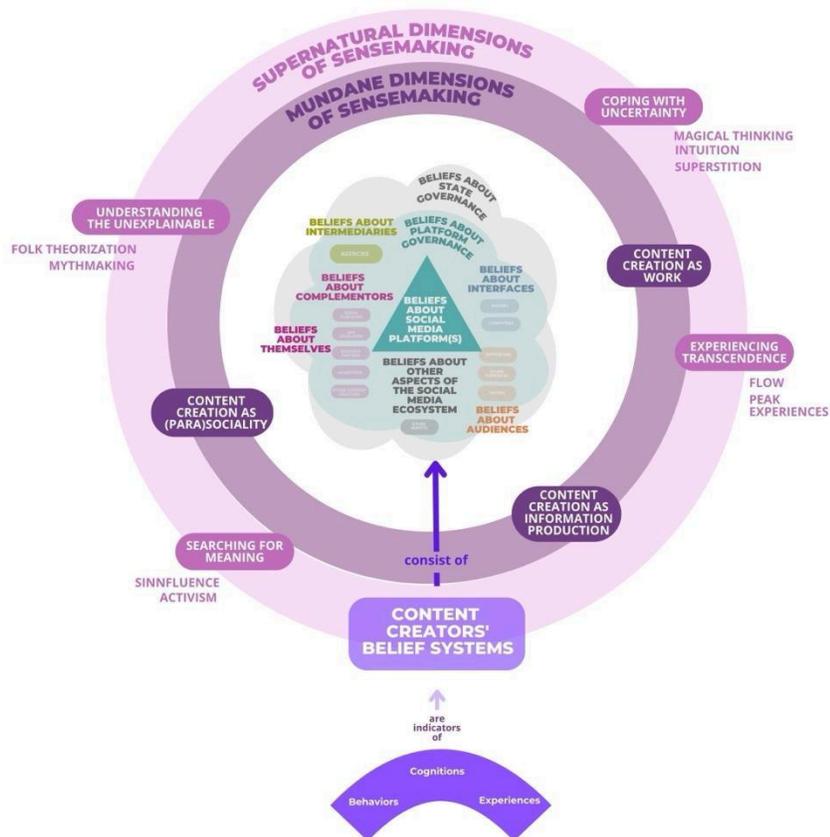
Figure 2: Analytical framework to investigate content creators' belief systems. (Own illustration)

Pilot study and initial findings

To refine this analytical model, we conducted a pilot study consisting of semi-structured interviews and a visual mapping elicitation method drawing from critical cartography studies applied to cyberspace (Crampton, 2004) and cognitive mapping (Jameson, 1988) as phenomenological and emancipatory approaches aimed at eliciting creators' perspectives about their own subjectivities in an everchanging social media ecosystem to assess relationships of power, agency and control. We interviewed 30 content creators in Switzerland and Spain across the range of creator typologies. The inclusion criteria included having more than 5000 followers, creating/uploading content periodically, and aiming reaching a larger audience beyond their immediate social circle.

The visual mapping method used our proposed sketch of a social media ecosystem to assess participants' perceived actors in their preferred social media ecosystem. The map defined the actors discussed in their interview and we assessed the cognitive, behavioral and experiential aspects of their belief systems. Interviews lasted between 80 and 90 minutes.

Considering the supernatural sense-making dimension and the importance of explaining the unexplainable in creators' activities, Magdalena, (59-year-old photography and

lifestyle creator) referred to "the unseen" while mapping social media ecosystem, and she explained:

> The unseen followers, never forget. There are many of them (…) now I have requests from companies and people I've never seen liking, I've never seen commenting, but they write to me and the say 'we have been following you for years and we are really impressed by your work, can we do something together' (…). When I give my keynotes, I always mention the unseen (…) there are also unseen brands and unseen creators.

Conclusions

The combined examination of mundane and supernatural dimensions of sense-making within social media ecosystems enables a broader understanding of content creation in aspects such as the growth of this industry despite its precarity and the nature of this aspirational labor. Some contributions of the proposed framework include the exploration of creators' beliefs about different aspects of the platform ecosystem such as algorithms, considering the impact of magical discourse among tech companies about these socio-technical systems (Nagy & Neff, 2024); the examination of content creation as individual cultural entrepreneurship (Poell et al., 2022) and magical thinking, which has been found among entrepreneurs as a future-oriented source of motivation that relies on trust rather than rational thinking (Ganzin et al., 2020).

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