Essays on Workers' Meaning-Making on Platforms:
A Case of Social Media Content Creators

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(Business Administration and Sociology)
in the University of Michigan
2024

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Dedication

To my family.

Acknowledgements

Where to even start. Maybe I will start with the fact that this was the first challenge in my life. The first time things were not breezy, the first time the ball didn't roll on its own. How clichéd it is to say that this is when I realized how nothing important in life can be accomplished on my own. An awfully late development to learn this only now, I have to admit, but a priceless lesson indeed. I am very happy to be able to write these names down.

Derek Harmon, my mentor, without whom getting through this process would have been inconceivable. He guided me with his intelligence, kindness, patience, and warmth. The honor and pleasure to work alongside him have been entirely mine. It is my sincerest wish to continue to be his 'rock star' and make him proud. Mark Mizruchi, who treated me as his equal on the sparring ring of ideas, wholeheartedly engaging with my work and never letting a typo slip by. His genuine passion for building knowledge inspires me. I thank my committee members, Jim Westphal, Jerry Davis, and Charlene Zietsma, for their steadfast support, as well as other faculty members in the Strategy and the M&O departments. I thank Michael Jensen for the pieces of wisdom coated in licorice—not sugar—that he would throw at me. I benefited immensely from having Sun Hyun Park as my master's advisor, even after leaving Seoul, who always led by example. He helped me find a home in Ann Arbor, and for that, I will continue to be a trouble he cannot get rid of.

I thank my informants and interviewees who made my research possible. They taught me to reflect on my own 'work,' which is easy to forget is also work. They taught me to ask myself what illusions I am following.

My friends, inside and outside of the program, all had their share in lifting me up from the deepest of messes—and jumping into the messes together. David Chung, my 'special' friend whose expertise consists of saving me from missing deadlines and disagreeing with me on most things. Kevin Lee, my shadow committee member and a helpless romantic. Suhyen Bae, my soul sister with some serious dance moves, even more serious power moves, and great ambitions. Jusang Lee, most comical in his seriousness. Brenda Myung, who enormously enriched my life

in Ann Arbor. Diana Jue-Rajasingh and Aseem Sinha, whose friendship and guidance showed me the steps I can take when I am lost and when I didn't even know that I was lost. Hilary Hoyt, my friend with a brilliant courage and a big, big, heart. Alaina Segura, my honorary cohort mate. Dilan Eren and Micah Rajunov, my mischievous buddies. Pyung Nahm, my academic brother. I thank other Beauty Salon members, Hayoung Cheon, Reuben Hurst, Jenna Song, Mike Park, Pablo Sanz, and AunRika Tucker-Shabazz for all the rambles that we shared. I also thank Hyun Ha Park, Somyung Lee, Myung Kyun Lee, and Isabelle Kim.

Above all, I thank my family. Their tears at the airport good-byes and at home, 3-hour-long phone calls full of laughter, nostril flexing, random flower pictures, pickled garlic, and unfathomable love for me, make me whole. At times I wondered whether what I do is worth the distance that we suffer, yet I was very glad to introduce a different world to them, kayaking in Lake Michigan and melting into the extraordinary sunsets together. Andrew Lee, my Ann-Arbor-hipster-Persephone. Meeting him as my life partner singlehandedly would have made my sojourning here worthwhile. I am ever grateful for his presence, his perspectives, his quirks, his calm fluidity, and his blueberry-for-every-breakfast rhythms in life.

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Abstract

Technological advancements continue to transform how work is organized, with platforms emerging as a prominent alternative to traditional corporate structures. Platforms, characterized by their use of algorithms and metrics to match parties and objects, provide flexible work opportunities yet introduce unique challenges for workers. Having escaped the dreaded managerial control, workers now face algorithmic control based on quantified evaluations of their work. Their work involves minimal interaction with not only managers—bosses they wanted to eliminate—but also co-workers and even clients they serve. In juxtaposition to the promises regarding flexibility and autonomy in work, suitable for entrepreneurial individuals who seek to express and fulfill themselves through work, these challenges represent how platforms disrupt existing assumptions about work.

This dissertation investigates the experiences of social media content creators—cultural producers engaged in creative work on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok—navigating the promises and the realities of platform-mediated work. Changes in work structures and the introduction of new technologies influence how workers perceive and derive meaning from their work. Therefore, this dissertation focuses on how these individuals engage in meaning-making. Like others in creative industries, content creators find appeal in work that allows for authentic self-expression and platforms that 'democratize' the opportunities to be part of cultural production. However, in this new landscape of work, they have to balance their self-expression with the demands of algorithms and market forces in their struggle to 'make it' as content creators. Flexible meaning-making emerges as a way that content creators respond to the gap between the promise and reality of platform-mediated work.

Chapter 1 delineates this evolution in the landscape of work. Chapters 2 and 3 are empirical studies drawing on qualitative methods, each focusing on a specific dimension of content creators' challenges and their responses in the form of meaning-making. Chapter 2 delves into the role of opaque algorithms in content creators' work, exploring how they reconcile their belief in their work as authentic self-expression with their reliance on engagement metrics

mediated by opaque algorithms. This is a source of deep frustration since content creators anchor their self-worth on engagement metrics. My findings suggest that while algorithmic opacity can be constraining, it also facilitates flexible meaning-making as content creators imagine how algorithms operate in ways that preserve their self-worth. Chapter 3 examines the pursuit of meaningful work on platforms, focusing on the role of cultural discourses that posit ideal work as work that enables authentic self-expression. Content creators navigate the tension between authenticity and success arising from the unrealistic promise that authenticity 'automatically' leads to success on social media platforms. They subsequently experience friction between their pursuit of authenticity and market success, which they weather by engaging in justificatory account-giving and boundary work. These findings also shed light on how cultural discourses on ideal work and authenticity persist, as content creators do not reject unrealistic ideals despite contradictions. Chapter 4 closes the dissertation by providing a summary and synthesis of findings, as well as future research directions.

By exploring platform-mediated work from the perspective of content creators based on a grounded investigation into their experiences, this dissertation contributes to the broader endeavor to understand the evolving nature of work, the role of technology, and the role of culture and meaning-making in how workers navigate this new landscape of work.

Chapter 1
Introduction

1.1 The evolving landscape of work: Platforms and new challenges for workers

Technological advancements have historically driven changes in how work is organized. Technology is an integral element that shapes how tasks are carried out and structured within organizations (e.g., Blau et al., 1976; Thompson, 1967), significantly impacting workers' day-to-day experiences (Barley & Kunda, 2001). This is particularly evident when considering that, as Davis and Sinha (2021) point out, organizations themselves can be conceptualized as a technology for different parties to cooperate to produce value (March & Simon, 1958). Recent developments in information and communication technology (ICT) and algorithmic technology enable novel ways of organizing work that differ from traditional corporate structures (Davis, 2016).

Platforms represent a significant alternative to, and a departure from, traditional work organizations, especially from the perspective of individual workers. Platforms function to 'match' multiple parties and objects (e.g., products/services, information, and persons), facilitating desirable outcomes (Evans & Schmalensee, 2016). For example, ridehailing platforms such as Uber match riders with drivers, and freelancing platforms such as Upwork match clients (and their projects) with freelancers. Central to the workings of today's platforms is that algorithms automate the matching and processing of input data regarding the parties and objects that are being matched and ensure quality matches at scale (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). For individuals, this means that they can find work on platforms (e.g., drivers on Uber), exchange goods/services (e.g., Etsy), or earn advertising revenues based on the attention they can attract with the content that they post (e.g., Google AdSense).

From the perspective of workers, platform-mediated work radically changes expectations and work processes. Platforms act as 'shadow employers,' mediating necessary exchanges for distributing individuals' work without being formal employers (Friedman, 2014). Unlike traditional organizations based on managerial control, which relies on workers' presence at

specific times and places, platform-mediated work offers flexibility regarding when, where, and how much to work (Gandini, 2019). While criticized for creating precarious work conditions and lacking stability and benefits (Ravenelle, 2019; Schor et al., 2020), platforms appeal to workers as they do indeed 'retreat' from traditional managerial control (e.g., Malin & Chandler, 2017). However, this flexibility comes with potential isolation for workers, with minimal interaction with platform staff or co-workers and sometimes no direct communication with matched parties (e.g., clients) (Wood et al., 2019). This lack of social environment presents unique challenges for workers (Ashford et al., 2018; Caza et al., 2018; Cropanzano et al., 2023).

Furthermore, although platforms offer some flexibility, they replace traditional managerial control with other means of control: algorithms and metrics. Platforms collect vast amounts of fine-grained data, verging on 'surveillance' (Zuboff, 2019). They use third-party evaluations as a measure of worker performance, contributing to 'soft control' over workers (Irani, 2015). These evaluations, which feed into algorithms, create a power asymmetry between workers and evaluators (often the end consumers or clients) and pressure workers to manage their metrics[1] (Cameron, 2022; Curchod et al., 2020; Rahman, 2021). Platforms also gamify these metrics, exerting techno-normative control over workers and compelling them to improve their performance (Gandini, 2019). These workplace 'games' that are integrated into the platforms' designs and their interfaces align platforms' interest with the goals of the games (e.g., nudges on the ridehailing apps to push drivers to work longer, Rosenblat, 2018; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016).

Most importantly, these metrics are integral to algorithmic control, determining 'matches' on platforms. Workers need to 'earn the favor' of algorithms to succeed, as matches determine their work opportunities and rewards (Ajunwa & Greene, 2019; Aneesh, 2009). Poor metric performance can limit exposure to profitable opportunities, subsequently affecting workers' metric performance and creating a negative spiral (Cameron, 2022; Rahman, 2021; Rosenblat, 2018). What makes workers' experience of algorithmic control especially challenging lies in the inherent opacity of machine learning algorithms, typically deployed on today's platforms. Machine-learning algorithms are opaque in that how they process input is very difficult to decipher due to the sheer scale of input and automatic updates to how they process input

[1] For similar mechanisms of power asymmetry on organizations facing third-party evaluations and the pressure to maintain their metric performance, see Orlikowski & Scott (2014).

(Burrell, 2016; Kellogg et al., 2020). This opacity can render individual resistance ineffective as workers struggle to understand and navigate this critical force controlling their work. For example, Rahman (2021) demonstrates how workers reach completely contradictory conclusions about how to game algorithms for success on a freelancing platform. Platforms' ability to constrain worker autonomy and flexibility through algorithmic control (Kellogg et al., 2020) raises questions about the effects of this new way of organizing work on workers.

In summary, platform-mediated work shifts away from the archetype of 'standard' work in corporations, testing our assumptions about workers' experiences (Gandini, 2019). While platforms offer flexible work without a 'boss,' they also introduce challenges such as isolation and algorithmic control. Given such a shift, it is crucial to understand how this new way of organizing work shapes workers' experiences as they navigate the unique challenges of platform-mediated work.

1.2 Cultural Production on Platforms: Social Media Platforms and Content Creators

As a new way of organizing work, platforms mediate diverse types of work, including ridehailing, manual labor, crowd-tasking, freelancing, and social media content creation (Vallas & Schor, 2020). While all platform-mediated work relies on data, metrics, and algorithms for matching and steering workers, they differ significantly in the nature of the tasks carried out, how workers earn income, and in-person requirements, leading to vastly different worker experiences (Schor et al., 2020; Vallas & Schor, 2020). Despite this diversity, research has predominantly focused on gig work, especially ridehailing, highlighting the need to explore other types of platform-mediated work to further our understanding of platform-mediated work (Schor et al., 2020). Among these, social media content creators stand out as cultural producers engaged in inherently creative work. Content creators, or influencers, produce content for social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, forming the basis of the rapidly growing influencer marketing industry, estimated at $13.8 billion in 2019 (Statista, 2021). They resemble other cultural producers, such as musicians, who rely on platforms to reach audiences through algorithmic 'matching' (Poell et al., 2021).

How cultural producers are experiencing platform-mediated work is of interest, as they have distinct expectations of their work compared to gig workers performing well-defined tasks. Creative industries have strong symbolic appeal for individuals with high expectations for self-

expression, creativity, and autonomy (e.g., Florida, 2002). The promise of platformization, especially for cultural producers, was that platforms will 'democratize' opportunities to participate in cultural production (Burgess & Green, 2018). Historically, institutional gatekeepers, such as critics and experts, had the power to filter the production and distribution of cultural products by assigning value to cultural products, limiting access to those opportunities (Bourdieu, 1993; Hesmondhalgh, 2006; Shirky, 2008). In contrast, platforms promised to enable the authentic self-expression of 'ordinary' people to blossom by minimizing gatekeeping compared to 'legacy' media (Burgess & Green, 2018; Turner, 2010). This promise has attracted many, evident in the fact that 30% of 8-12-year-olds in the US and UK aspire to become content creators (Stillman, 2019).

However, the reality of working in cultural production on platforms has not alleviated the precarious conditions of creative industries. 'Cool' jobs in 'hot' industries have long been marked by economic and emotional precarity and intense competition, driven by symbolic appeal (Adler, 2021; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; Neff et al., 2005). Platforms often reproduce and potentially amplify them, contributing to low wages and short-term employment in winner-takes-all markets (e.g., Rieder et al., 2020). This is because while platforms have lowered entry barriers to cultural production, exemplified by 500 hours' worth of videos uploaded to YouTube every minute of the day (Statista, 2022), they also introduce new filtering mechanisms through algorithms. The 'publish-then-filter' approach, as opposed to the traditional 'filter-then-publish,' relies heavily on algorithms to sort and distribute the vast amount of content being produced, intensifying competition and precarity (Gillespie, 2016; Shirky, 2008). For instance, content creators are "barely getting by" (Needleman & Alcántara, 2024), similarly facing the winner-takes-all dynamics[2] and dealing with algorithms and platforms' fickle governance practices (Van Dijck, 2013).

The experiences of social media content creators reveal the contradictions of platform-mediated cultural production. Platforms offer the allure of meaningful, creative work, enabling authentic self-expression; at the same time, they expose content creators to significant economic and emotional precarity. Studying these dynamics can offer insights into work that closely aligns with cultural ideals yet challenges those ideals with new forms of control and competition. This

[2] For example, on YouTube, "0.04% of channels with more than 1M subscribers account for a little more than a third of all subscribers and views on the platform" (Rieder et al., 2020).

examination calls for grounded studies to unpack the effects of platformization on cultural production and the unique challenges social media content creators face, especially when existing assumptions about work no longer hold (Barley & Kunda, 2001). They would contribute to a deeper understanding of this evolving landscape of work as shaped by technological advancements.

1.3 Empirical Approaches: Content Creators Navigating the Gap Between Ideals and Reality

My dissertation examines the contradictions between the ideals and reality of social media content creators' work, delving into their experiences and responses. I use qualitative methods for grounded observation of actions and access to accounts of content creators. These methods are particularly useful for exploring an emerging gap between theoretical assumptions about work and the realities of work as shaped by rapid technological advancements (Barley et al., 2017; Barley & Kunda, 2001). My data sources include (1) online observations of activities and exchanges that occur in the online environment that are integral to content creators' work, (2) in-person observations of content creators' work that capture overlooked tasks and embodied experiences, including emotional responses in real-time (Nieborg & Poell, 2018), and (3) interviews to understand both actions and the accounts of those actions.

Based on these approaches, Chapter 2 investigates the role of opaque algorithms in content creators' work, given their belief that their work is a form of self-expression. While content creators ideally view their work as authentic self-expression, they are vulnerable to engagement metrics and algorithms mediating those metrics as they determine content creators' income and status in the industry (Christin & Lewis, 2021). Consequently, they have to navigate the opacity of algorithms, raising questions about how they reconcile the fact that they cannot fully understand algorithms mediating their metrics performance, to which they tie their self-worth. My findings highlight content creators' ability to engage in flexible meaning-making of algorithms, enabled, rather than constrained by, the opaque nature of algorithms. This reveals a contradictory role of algorithmic opacity, on the one hand, constraining workers, and, on the other hand, enabling flexible meaning-making that helps them cope with the ramifications of the very opacity of the technology.

Chapter 3 examines how content creators seek meaningfulness in work and navigate the tensions between the pursuit of success and authenticity, a virtue underpinning the meaningfulness in their work. These frictions require content creators to maneuver through discrepancies between the promise and reality of work. In response to the discrepancies, content creators engage in flexible meaning-making in the form of justificatory account-giving and boundary work which maintains their self-perception of authenticity and, thus, the meaningfulness of their work. My findings highlight how these responses help content creators reconcile their ideals of work with the harsh realities of platform-mediated work. Additionally, this study reveals how a field-level myth reflecting cultural discourses on ideal work might persist despite the prevalent frictions between the idealized myth and the reality of content creators' work, illuminating the enduring influence of cultural discourses on workers' experiences of meaningfulness.

Together, Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate the complex dynamics in the evolving landscape of work shaped by technological advancements, underscoring the role of cultural ideals and workers' expectations about work. While the shifting cultural ideals about work echo longstanding discussions on the nature of work itself (i.e., work as an expression of humanity vs. labor for economic necessity, Fayard, 2021), new technologies are reigniting these discussions and inspiring debates about what work should be like. This dissertation aims to capture how these elaborate interactions shape the experiences of today's workers as they actively maneuver through them.

Chapter 2
Algorithmic Imaginaries and Self-Worth Among Social Media Content Creators

2.1 Introduction

For workers, platform work promises a solution to traditional work in organizations, where organizational constraints can leave them feeling akin to "corporate slave(s)" (Rosenblat, 2018, p. 36). Platform work is presented to workers as an opportunity to be their own boss as "micro-entrepreneurs," operating autonomously outside of the iron cage of organizational constraints (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017, p. 183). According to the promise, this new way of organizing work through platforms powered by technological advances brings entrepreneurship to the masses (e.g., Sundararajan, 2017). This ideal of the enterprising self, suggesting one should "love" one's work, is juxtaposed with the image of traditional work in organizations that constrain workers' expression of their true selves (e.g., Duffy, 2017; Rosenblat, 2018). The underlying idea is that work should be the "primary means by which people aim to develop themselves," as it allows for self-expression and fulfillment (Fayard, 2021, p. 208). As the promise of platform work resonates with workers (Pew Research Center, 2021), different types of platform workers—ride-hail drivers, professional service providers, microtaskers, and content creators—are contributing to the rapidly growing platform economy (Vallas & Schor, 2020).

Despite this positive promise, an emerging body of research has started to reveal a mismatch between the promise and the reality of the increasingly prevalent platform work, namely that workers are finding themselves in an 'invisible cage' created by opaque algorithms that govern their work and success (Rahman, 2021). These algorithms are a source of control and power asymmetry that deprive workers, especially gig workers, of their autonomy (Cameron, 2022; Curchod et al., 2020; Rahman, 2021; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). A key concern is that these algorithms automate the evaluation of work, which in turn is used to direct and discipline workers (Kellogg et al., 2020). While automation can eliminate direct human supervision, a central feature of algorithms is their opacity, which renders the inner workings of the technology nearly impossible for workers to understand. This opacity serves as a key constraint that prevents

worker resistance (Kellogg et al., 2020). Platforms can thus use opaque algorithms to control workers, using the technology to track minute details of work for quantified evaluations in a state of 'surveillance' (Gandini, 2019; Zuboff, 2019). This issue echoes the historical perspective of technology controlling the "rhythms and methods of human labor" (Braverman, 1998; Vallas & Schor, 2020, p. 278). This is also consistent with the focus of earlier work on a particular type of platform work—gig work involving short-term stints (e.g., Cameron, 2022; Rahman, 2021)—that highlights autonomy (Vallas & Schor, 2020).

However, whether the experience of gig workers is similar to that of other types of platform workers is unclear (Schor et al., 2020). Other types of platform work are burgeoning, such as that of content creators. Content creators produce audio-visual content that generates engagement from users on social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. Because of this activity, they are distinct from other platform workers in their emphasis on self-expression, rather than autonomy, through their work—resulting in them being more similar to venture workers who can become attached to their work than gig workers (Vallas & Schor, 2020). While the work of content creators is under-explored, it is gaining cultural and economic significance. Culturally, 30% of 8 to12-years-old children aspire to become content creators in the US and the UK (Stillman, 2019). Economically, content creators' work is the basis of the social media marketing industry, estimated at $226B in 2022 (Chanthadumrongrat, 2022). Despite the growing significance of their work, we lack an adequate understanding of what it means for the success of their work—self-expression—to largely depend on platform algorithms. Would this relationship between self and work mean that content creators also fall victim to the false promise of platforms, finding themselves trapped in the "invisible cage" created by opaque algorithms? Given that we are only starting to understand platform work, would different dynamics unfold regarding their meaning-making of algorithms?

In this study, I explore content creators' meaning-making of the algorithms that govern their work and success. I focus on lifestyle content creators whose primary source of value is their self-expression. Through content, their audience consumes their 'personality,' looking to form intimate, personal connections with them (i.e., parasocial relationships), which translates to engagement with their content (Abidin, 2018; Duffy, 2017). Quantified by engagement metrics (e.g., the number of views and "likes"), the success of this work depends on algorithms, which heavily mediate engagement—70% of content consumption on YouTube and 90-95% on TikTok

comes from algorithmic recommendations (Nishijima, 2021). Thus, algorithms that determine engagement and, in turn, content creators' income and status are critical considerations in their work (Christin & Lewis, 2021). Yet, content creators also face a particularly high level of opacity of the technology. This opacity exists because of a recursive loop between the algorithmic mediation and engagement. In this loop, engagement is shaped by whether and how algorithms push the specific content, which is fed back to the algorithms, *ad infinitum*. The outcome of this process, on the individual content level, is therefore unforeseeable even for engineers who have access to algorithms running behind the platforms (Narayanan, 2023).

In order to explore how content creators make meaning of this opaque technology, I use interviews, online observations, and in-person observations. My findings identify the underlying patterns of content creators' meaning-making of the algorithms, as well as reveal a surprising role of opacity in enabling flexible meaning-making. Specifically, content creators, who view their work as a means of self-expression, establish a link between their self-worth and their work's performance. Given this link, the opacity of algorithms mediating the performance, which renders the performance unpredictable, becomes a significant source of frustration for content creators. At the same time, the opacity of the algorithms facilitates flexibility in content creators' meaning-making, helping them preserve their self-worth. Depending on their meaning-making, content creators might attribute bias, inconsistency, or both to algorithms to discredit the technology, which helps them deflect blame when their performance falters. This gives rise to a contradictory role of algorithmic opacity in content creators' work. On the one hand, it threatens their self-worth associated with performance, which is experienced as unpredictable due to the opacity. On the other hand, it enables flexibility in content creators' meaning-making of algorithms, allowing them to preserve their self-worth.

This study makes three contributions by showing the surprising role of opacity in enabling flexible meaning-making that preserves self-worth. First, this study contributes to the literature on how platform workers experience opaque algorithms. While prior work has focused on the constraining role of opaque algorithms (Rahman, 2021; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016), my findings suggest that opacity can also play an enabling role in workers' meaning-making. Second, this study furthers our understanding of the close relationship between the self and work. Prior studies pointed out that work has increasingly become a personal "avenue for self-expression," especially outside organizational contexts (Ashford et al., 2018; Petriglieri et al.,

2019, p. 136). My findings highlight the centrality of algorithmic technology, which primarily facilitates this work arrangement outside of organizations. Workers' meaning-making of algorithms can shape their response to potential issues that arise from the close coupling between the self and work, such as a threat to self-worth. Third, this study expands our understanding of platform firms' use of opaque algorithms to control workers. Prior studies assumed that algorithmic opacity benefits platforms, as it contributes to power asymmetry and prevents system-gaming (e.g., Curchod et al., 2020). My findings, however, demonstrate that opacity can also enable workers to engage in meaning-making that discredits the technology and vilifies the platform firms as a source of bias in algorithms.

2.2 Theory

2.2.1 Algorithms in Platform Work and the Entrepreneurial Promise

Platforms have been advertised as allowing for autonomy and flexibility, central to which is the role of algorithms as the technological solution that eliminates organizational control and brings entrepreneurship to the masses (Vallas & Schor, 2020). Algorithms, to social scientists' interest, can be defined as "computer-programmed procedures that transform input data into desired outputs," producing knowledge and/or decisions (Gillespie et al., 2014, as cited in Kellogg et al., 2020, p.366). Algorithms make it possible for platforms to operate without organizational control because they can automate evaluations and decision-making, requiring little human intervention (Kellogg et al., 2020; Vallas & Schor, 2020). Platforms facilitate exchanges by using algorithms to perform matches among different parties (e.g., ride-hail drivers and passengers, social media content, and users). These matches are often performed based on third-party evaluations such as ratings, the processing of which is mediated by algorithms for automation and scale (Karunakaran et al., 2022; Orlikowski & Scott, 2014; Rahman, 2021). From workers' perspective, they can join platforms with little entry barrier and set their own schedules thanks to algorithms. With autonomy and flexibility, platforms promise that workers can be their own bosses (Gandini, 2019).

Platform work, therefore, promises an alternative to the traditional work and the fate of "a corporate slave" (Rosenblat, 2018, p. 36). The idea underlying this appeal is that work should be the "primary means by which people aim to develop themselves," allowing for self-expression

and fulfillment—to which organizational control is an obstacle (Fayard, 2021, p. 208). Platform workers, as micro-entrepreneurs, are framed as being in charge of their work lives thanks to the autonomy and the freedom to be themselves at work (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017). Instead of being forced to do what their organizations require, workers can pursue their passion and do what they "love" (Duffy, 2017; Rosenblat, 2018). Therefore, according to the promise, this new way of organizing work, powered by technological advances, should allow workers to be free agents who can express and develop themselves through work (Rahman, 2021). This vision has resonated with workers who find autonomy and flexibility in platform work appealing, contributing to the rapid growth of the platform economy (Pew Research Center, 2021).

2.2.2 Algorithms as a Source of Control and the Role of Opacity

As opposed to the promise, an emerging body of work has started revealing the reality that platform workers experience algorithms as a source of control. Studies find that workers see algorithms as the new boss, depriving them of the promised autonomy and creating a power asymmetry that disadvantages them (Kellogg et al., 2020). This is because algorithms serve as a critical mediator of success on these platforms; thus, earning their favor becomes necessary for success (Rahman, 2021). Falling out of algorithms' favor can mean sub-optimal matches that workers might not prefer or lower levels of reward (Cameron, 2022; Rahman, 2021). Algorithms collect and process highly comprehensive information about work(ers) in real-time, which some even argue is akin to 'surveillance' (Zuboff, 2019). Moreover, platforms' technological affordances are often designed in ways that users—consumers who evaluate work—are prioritized over workers, adding to the power asymmetry that workers experience (e.g., Curchod et al., 2020; Orlikowski & Scott, 2014; Rahman, 2021). Therefore, the reality of platform work is that platforms exert "soft control" on workers through algorithms, which might be just as constraining, if not more constraining, than the organizational iron cage (Irani, 2015, p. 227, as cited in Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Stark & Pais, 2020).

In fact, scholars are asking if workers are subjected to an even tighter control with algorithms than being under organization control, given that the opacity of algorithms makes workers' resistance challenging (Curchod et al., 2020; Rahman, 2021). Algorithms are opaque, meaning workers are unable to understand the inner workings of the algorithms (Kellogg et al., 2020). This might be the case even with the technical literacy necessary to understand algorithms

for two reasons (Burrell, 2016). First, platforms might intentionally maintain secrecy about algorithms, specifically to prevent gaming—the illegitimate practices to earn algorithms' favor (Petre et al., 2019; Rahman, 2021). Second, the very strength of algorithms, automatically processing a vast amount of data, means that the scale and complexity of calculations involved are beyond what the human mind can grapple with (e.g., Anthony et al., 2023; Burrell, 2016). Furthermore, the 'entanglement' of human inputs with the technical workings of algorithms, as algorithms are embedded in the broader social context and feed on data of human inputs, adds to the layer of complexity (Jarrahi et al., 2021; Orlikowski & Scott, 2016). Of course, this is not to say that any understanding of algorithms is unachievable. Instead, it means that despite known general principles upon which algorithms operate, it is nearly impossible to explain individual results of algorithmic mediation (Anthony et al., 2023).

The opacity of algorithms frustrates workers not only because they are unable to understand the processes that mediate their success but also because they are unable to resist the constraints imposed by platforms (Cameron, 2022; Rahman, 2021; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). More specifically, they are left in the dark about what elements are being considered for evaluations, how those elements are being weighed, and when these are changing as algorithms are updated (Rahman, 2021). This also limits workers' ability to contest erroneous evaluations or decisions made by algorithms since it is difficult even to identify the errors with certainty. Some workers try to experiment and reverse-engineer the inner workings of algorithms, often to little avail. For example, Rahman (2021) shows how such efforts can lead to contradictory conclusions due to the opacity of algorithms. In this study, professional platform workers experiment with the durations of projects for more favorable ratings. While some believe that shorter projects help them improve their ratings, others believe that longer projects have the same effect. Given the confusion and frustration that workers experience due to the opacity of algorithms, scholars are asking if algorithms trap workers in the "invisible cage," a "post-panoptic" setting that is more restrictive than the organizational iron cage (Rahman, 2021, p. 949).

2.2.3 A Distinct Type of Platform Workers Pursuing Work as a Form of Self-Expression

While these recent studies address essential aspects of platform work, questions about other burgeoning types of platform work, such as that of content creators, remain under-

explored. What distinguishes content creators from other platform workers, including gig workers, is the extent to which they consider their work as a form of self-expression (Duffy, 2017). Content production is considered a form of creative self-expression, encapsulated in YouTube's slogan "Broadcast Yourself." The work supposedly allows them to simply 'be themselves' and have 'fun' in the absence of institutional gatekeepers whose influence would distort their self-expression (Burgess & Green, 2018; Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). Content creators tend to be highly invested in their work, willing to even forego income and stability at times with the aspiration of eventual success (Duffy, 2017). Vallas and Schor (2020) draw a similarity between content creators and startup workers, who can also be deeply invested in their work (e.g., Neff, 2012). While this orientation to work has been recognized as prevalent in creative industries (e.g., Neff et al., 2005), it also has a broader cultural resonance for workers looking for meaningfulness (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Therefore, content creators' work, highlighting the close relationship between their selves and their work, raises questions about how they engage in meaning-making of algorithms differently in ways that offer new insights.

Prior literature on technology at work hints at why one might expect new patterns in content creators' meaning-making of algorithms, given their different orientations towards work. Studies have demonstrated that workers engage in meaning-making of technologies in relation to their selves. For example, technology can be perceived as a source of personal pride (e.g., Kunda, 1992) or a threat to one's worth at work (e.g., Bechky, 2020; Nelson & Irwin, 2014). Indeed, it seems that workers' meaning-making of technology is deeply intertwined with their concern for their selves and, in particular, how valued they are. Then, how would content creators engage in meaning-making of algorithms that mediate the success of their self-expression, which could significantly influence their sense of self? On the one hand, they could find themselves highly vulnerable to the constraint from opaque algorithms, as their self-expression is judged at the 'court of algorithmic appeal' (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016). On the other hand, new dynamics that we might not have expected could emerge, given that we are only starting to understand platform workers' experience of algorithms. Understanding this interplay of algorithms, self, and work can be valuable—this idea of work as a form of self-expression can serve as a significant driver for work outside of the organizational settings (e.g., Ashford et al., 2018; Petriglieri et al., 2019), largely mediated by the algorithmic technology today.

2.3 Research Context and Design

2.3.1 Context: Lifestyle Content Creation

I look at social media content creators across YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. On these platforms, engagement for content, and thus content creators' success, is mediated mainly by notoriously opaque algorithms—70% of content consumption on YouTube and 90-95% on TikTok come from algorithmic recommendations (Nishijima, 2021). Thus, operating in the 'court of algorithmic appeal' (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016) where algorithms function as the gatekeeper for content consumption, much of content creators' strategizing for success on social media platforms target algorithms, which is challenging given the opacity of these algorithms (e.g., Cotter, 2019). Algorithms shape user engagement, which in is fed back to the algorithms to shape subsequent engagement *ad nauseam*. This recursive loop between engagement and mediation of algorithms—engagement as both input and output of algorithmic mediation—especially makes it a struggle for content creators to understand, for each content, why and how the eventual engagement has come about. Even engineers with technical literacy and a high-level understanding of how algorithms work agree that engagement is unpredictable for each content due to this recursive loop that gives social media engagement an 'emergent' characteristic (Narayanan, 2023). Therefore, content creators need to deal with this opacity of algorithms as they attempt to strategize to earn the favor of the "black box" technology for engagement.

More directly as a measure of performance, engagement metrics determine content creators' income and status (Christin & Lewis, 2021). Regarding status, content creators are categorized into different tiers based on engagement metrics, particularly the size of their audience measured by subscriber or follower numbers, despite some variance in where the boundaries of each tier are. Becoming a higher-tier member is a substantial milestone for content creators. For example, YouTube sends silver, gold, and diamond awards for reaching specific numbers of subscribers, which becomes a status symbol for content creators. Also, there are multiple ways in which engagement can be directly and indirectly linked to content creators' income. Content creators might monetize their online presence through multiple of following means: platforms' advertising revenue sharing scheme for the revenue generated from content that they uploaded, sponsorship deals with brands (e.g., posting about the brands' products for compensation), selling merchandise to their audience (e.g., t-shirts with their account names on),

and soliciting donations from the audience. Content creators can draw from multiple ways of monetization, yet these ways all hinge on engagement that content creators can generate through their content.

Among different content creators facing opaque algorithms mediating engagement, I focus on lifestyle content creators. Lifestyle content creators' work represents an extreme case of the tight coupling between their selves and their work, which helps build theory by crystallizing the dynamics that unfold from such coupling (Eisenhardt, 1989). Lifestyle content creators produce content about their everyday life activities, such as pictures and video footage of how they dress, what makeup they wear, and how they decorate their homes, turning facets of their lives into narrated content. Nevertheless, most importantly, it is their selves that constitute the appeal of their content to users. Platform users engage with what they perceive to be content creators' personalities as reflected in the content about their everyday lives, forming an intimate relationship with them that serves as the basis of engagement (Abidin, 2018; Duffy, 2017). It is content creators' ability to generate engagement that makes them an asset to the platforms and advertisers looking to reach their audience (Roccapriore & Pollock, 2023). Engagement metrics (e.g., likes, follows, views), thus, are a quintessential measure of the value they create. These metrics, heavily mediated by algorithms, serve as reputational currency on platforms that indicate their worth as assets to platforms and advertisers (Gandini, 2016; Marwick, 2015).

2.3.2 Data Collection

To investigate this context, I conducted interviews, netnography (i.e., ethnography of the online, Kozinets, 2010), and in-person observations. Platform-mediated work is a relatively new phenomenon, and the roles of platforms and their algorithms in shaping work are yet to be fully theorized. Qualitative methods are suitable for building theories for novel phenomena (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). I rely on multiple methods to obtain data, as multiple sources of data offer triangulation and thus enrich the understanding of the phenomenon (Metiu & Fayard, 2015). I started with netnography to immerse myself in the context and then launched interviews followed by in-person observations while continuing with netnography. Given that content creators' work blurs the boundary between online and offline, it is important to observe their work in both realms (e.g., Massa & O'Mahony, 2021).

2.3.2.1 Interviews

Interviews allowed me to access participants' accounts and descriptions of their practices (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). I interviewed content creators who prioritize different platforms and have varying audience sizes, as well as industry experts and other players in the broader influencer marketing ecosystem. I first started interviewing content creators on YouTube, then soon realized that they were often operating on multiple platforms, especially on Instagram and TikTok. Following this new information, I expanded my sampling to include content creators focusing on Instagram and TikTok as their main platforms (see Appendix A for a list of interviewees with more details). Sampling across content creators who focus on different platforms and with varying audience sizes allowed me to see whether those differences have an impact on how content creators encounter algorithms and, if they do, in what ways.

Cold emailing was the primary means of recruiting interviewees, as most content creators make their email addresses public for marketers to reach them. A smaller subset of interviewees was recruited using snowball sampling. It became clear from initial exploratory interviews that algorithms were a primary concern in interviewees' work, who brought up the topic without active prompting. A semi-structured, open-ended format was used to probe into the interviewees' meaning-making of algorithms and their accounts of strategizing. Each interview typically lasted an hour, mostly over video calls, some in person, and one over the phone. A total of 51 interviews were conducted. They were transcribed using professional services.

2.3.2.2 Netnography (Online Ethnography)

Much of content creators' work is visible online in the form of the content that they publish, interactions with their audience, and conversations on discussion forums in which they might actively participate or simply follow. Netnography is an application of ethnographic methods to online communities to observe socio-cultural interactions in the virtual space and meanings that emerge (Kozinets, 2010). Netnography (Kozinets, 2010) was conducted on social media platforms—YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok—with a focus on their content and the interactions between creators and their audience, as well as on discussion forums that are popular among them. These online forums are important to content creators who often start with few professional networks. Content creators turn to these forums to promote their channels, troubleshoot what they see as platform malfunctions, stay updated regarding social media trends, and keep up with the changes in platform algorithms and policies. As I conducted observations

of the materials and interactions in the online spaces of social media platforms and discussion forums, I took field notes. I also collected relevant materials during the observations, including content, screenshots of interactions (e.g., exchanges in the comment sections of social media platforms), and discussion threads.

As a way to immerse myself in the world of lifestyle content creators, I first started to learn about and follow high-profile lifestyle content creators who were frequently mentioned by others, as I discovered through online searches, conversations on online forums, comments left on social media platforms, and algorithmic recommendations (Christin, 2020) on social media platforms. The initial immersion, combined with information from the interviews I started conducting, led to a set of online spaces I regularly visited—YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and four discussion forums. Netnography started in May 2022. I made near-daily visits to the social media platforms and discussion forums for the first four months, followed by a period of intermittent (1-4 times per month) visits until June 2023. In addition to field notes, this netnography led to 95 articles, 114 screenshots, and 103 discussion threads.

2.3.2.3 In-Person Observations

I conducted in-person observations in Los Angeles, the cultural mecca of content creation that attracts aspiring and successful content creators alike (e.g., Lorenz, 2020; Williams, 2015). Being in Los Angeles made it possible to observe the work of as many content creators as possible in the given time period, as they tend to be otherwise geographically dispersed, posing a logistical difficulty. For five weeks, from February to March 2022, I shadowed content creators, some of whom I built rapport with through interviewing. I met others during the fieldwork. For example, I contacted content creators I met at events for interviews and shadowing. I followed various work activities of content creators, including photo/video shooting and editing, picking up PR products, attending various types of "influencer events" that brands organize, from large parties to private luncheons, and meeting with marketing agencies.

Shadowing content creators, I was also able to capture some processes that were not mentioned in the interviews, especially because some of the content creators' work is integrated into their daily lives (e.g., checking engagement metrics on social media platforms, location scouting for future content production) (Duffy, 2017). While observations happened in a relatively short period, I was able to build rapport with informants and access the lived realities of their work as they unfolded in real-time, such as the practices of engagement gaming (i.e.,

practices to boost initial user engagement on social media platforms), the surprising boredom at marketing events that are portrayed as exciting on social media, and negotiation processes with brands and marketing agencies. My 5-week fieldwork generated 170 pages of field notes.

2.3.3 Data Analysis

I used an inductive approach to analyze my data, iterating between data and the literature. The process of analysis was intertwined with that of data collection. From the early netnography, it became clear that content creators were deeply concerned with the question of growth and, more broadly, engagement metrics, as well as algorithms in relation to their engagement. As I started interviews, content creators would bring up having to deal with algorithms as a main aspect of their work, directing my attention to their experiences of algorithms. Starting with open coding of my data, I used NVivo to annotate my data and organize my codes, especially around themes that were emerging in relation to content creators' experiences of algorithms—and how they were intensely occupied by the engagement metrics and the algorithms mediating the engagement. My data from interviews contained emotionally-charged accounts of content creators' experiences relating to algorithms, echoed by data from netnography.

My data revealed that content creators were actively imagining the inner workings of algorithms, helping me narrow my focus. While prior work tends to pay most attention to the consequences of algorithms' constraints on workers' actions, some existing studies (e.g., Cameron, 2022; Cotter, 2019) pay more attention to gig workers' meaning-making of algorithms, demonstrating workers' perception of algorithms as either benevolent or malevolent. Similarly, in my data, I was able to see that content creators would talk about whether algorithms worked in their favor or against their favor depending on whether they considered the performance of their content—engagement—was satisfactory. However, their accounts appeared to contain more complexity than those described in the existing studies. Focusing on varying accounts relating to algorithms, I discovered that each content creator can draw from more than one way of imagining algorithms. Eventually, I was able to identify different ways of imagining the inner workings of algorithms that content creators were drawing from and the underlying patterns that structured those ways of imagining. In the following sections, I unpack these different ways in which content creators imagine algorithms, as well as the underlying patterns that I identified.

2.4 Findings

This section consists of two parts. In the first part, I explain how content creators experience the performance of their self-expression as unpredictable due to the opacity of algorithms mediating it. This unpredictability not only frustrates them but also poses a serious threat to content creators' self-worth associated with the performance of their self-expression. In the second part, I delve into the underlying patterns of content creators' meaning-making of algorithms as they imagine the inner workings of the technology, describing different ways of meaning-making that serve to shield their self-worth, with varying effectiveness, in response to the threat. In line with existing research on algorithms in other disciplines, I label the outcome of content creators' meaning-making as "algorithmic imaginaries"—how "people imagine, perceive, and experience algorithms" (Bucher, 2017, p. 31). More broadly, prior research on technology addresses the importance of "stories" that people tell of technologies. These stories, such as algorithmic imaginaries, might be based on "superstitious learning," yet they "are still consequential to action … regardless of their accuracy" (Anthony et al., 2023, p. 6). Given the opacity of algorithms, these stories can be particularly relevant in orienting content creators, as will be unpacked in this section.

2.4.1 Opaque Algorithms, Unpredictable Performance, and the Threat to Self-Worth

Content creators are frustrated as they experience the performance of their self-expression, quantified by engagement metrics, as unpredictable, given the opacity of algorithms mediating it. Since engagement is critical for content creators' success, they need to play the numbers game in the 'court of algorithmic appeal' (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016), which can develop into what some describe as "addiction" (I#3[3])—an "obsession with checking numbers every few minutes" to the extent that "it's just what consumes my life now and all I think about" (W#205). Their performance is unpredictable, and despite this need to excel at the numbers game, it brews frustration for content creators. Even successful content creators are not immune to this frustration. For example, a content creator who had multiple instances of her content going viral with more than a million views explains that not "know(ing) whether your post is good or not until the views come in" is the "hardest thing" about her work (I#15). Content

[3] I: Interview, W: Web Material, FN: Field Note

creators identify opaque algorithms as the source of this unpredictability in performance. They lament the lack of "rhyme or reason" in algorithms, as shown in the quote below, whose inner workings feel like "magic"—the technology being "the most puzzling thing" about their work (I#12).

> **Puzzling** is that dang algorithm. That is like **the thorn of my existence**. If I could just tap into the algorithm, if somebody could just give me **the magic key tag**, … if I could figure that out, I think it would **bring a lot of comfort and peac**e to me. ... It's like there's **no rhyme or reason** to use. I cannot figure it out for the life of me and it's like the more time I watch like, how to grow on YouTube, how to understand algorithm. I'm like **just more confused, because nothing makes sense**. … And I mean, **I don't think anybody knows**, people just have suggestions and theories because it's, even people who have grown are like, I can't even tell you why YouTube picked that one video of mine to make go viral. (I#12)

However, what makes algorithms truly "the thorn of … existence" for content creators (I#12) beyond the economic gain that depends on the metrics mediated by algorithms is that their self-worth is at stake. Indeed, content creators associate their sense of personal worth with engagement, which comes to be coded as the affective response that their self-expression can engender in others. In this way, their performance means more than cold numbers. It can make content creators "feel really loved" (I#9) or damage their self-worth, as they feel that their audience "stopped caring about" them upon faltering performance (FN#17). My field note captures this perspective from a content creator who, despite her efforts including paying Instagram to boost her posts[4], had recently scored lower engagement than expected.

> She just came back from a trip to a PR agency where she was able to collect a large-bag-full of free products. Likening the PR products to **"Christmas gifts"** she gets for having followers, she talks about how **"it's really hard when I feel like things are just falling apart." Losing followers felt like "they stopped caring about me," and she is in disbelief: "Like how do you go from getting 5600 likes for a picture then only getting**

[4] Content creators have the option to pay for algorithmic boost on Instagram and TikTok. On Instagram, it is called "Boost," and on TikTok, it is called "Promote."

> **2000?** … **When things blew up, I got 2000 messages for my birthday,** wishing me happy birthday. That's crazy, that's not normal. **Now I only get 100,** which, I don't know, is normal? **It makes me question the decisions I made.**" (FN#17)

The declining number of followers and likes, key engagement metrics, has been a blow to her feeling of being loved and cared for, to the extent of making her "question the decisions" she made. This demonstrates how faltering performance can be devastating for them on a personal level and negatively affect their sense of self-worth.

Furthermore, in their interaction with brands and marketers, content creators also experience vastly different treatments based on their performance, which can affect their sense of self-worth. In short, some get the "VIP treatment" (FN#15), and others do not. Differential treatments can include the size and composition of PR packages (i.e., free products that content creators receive from brands), invitations to brand-related events of varying exclusivity (e.g., private concerts, private luncheons), and opportunities to access social media platform representatives at marketing agencies. Content creators provided accounts of experiences when they were made to feel lesser because of what Interviewee #48 describes as a "hierarchy" based on the "numbers that you have." She describes an event that she attended when she was still small ("I had 150,000 (followers)") with two other bigger content creators who were her friends ("at least two million (followers)").

> **There's one thing I could complain about. There is absolutely a hierarchy with brands**. I mean obviously, the amount of **numbers** that you have is that's what it is. It's essentially a hierarchy. ... We were standing next to each other and the brand brought up the celebrity and kind of **pushed me out of the way** to introduce them to the other two people. And **I was very close with this person from the brand**. And I was just like, **that is so strange**. They (other content creator friends with larger followings) were absolute priority and **I was just kind of pushed to the side.** So that happens a lot even with brands that you have a good relationship with. (I#48)

Accounts of these instances emphasize how engagement, as content creators' performance, is associated not only with economic success, but also with a sense of their worth as people.

Given the association, content creators find the unpredictable performance deeply frustrating, as well as the algorithmic opacity that is driving the unpredictability. While content

creators describe the emotional "rollercoaster ride" (I#15) of the unpredictable performance, the threat to their sense of self-worth is particularly pronounced when the performance falters. This "mood swing" (I#17) from the performance that they are unable to predict is exemplified in the following quote from a content creator who had to deal with significant damage to her mental health from her work.

> … **okay, this is performing well in my channel. Let me do this again,** but in a different way. So I would do the same thing and then I wouldn't get the response that I was hoping for. So say like, **I wish this video hit like a 100K but say it didn't.** … It's almost like seeking validation. So it's like **the more people are watching me the more I'm valued, the more I have worked, the more people like see my worth and like give me the thumbs up, that yay.** You got it, like you got it, dude. **But then the less and less people were watching I was realizing oh no, they're not validating me**. … yay, the numbers are high. I'm worthy. The numbers are low. I'm not worthy. … **it started to really cause mental issues where I felt like my worth and my wellbeing is being determined by views**. (I#17)

It is this threat to self-worth facing unpredictable performance—a video not hitting 100K views that was expected given that she was trying to replicate previously successful content—as opaque algorithms mediate engagement that content creators have to cope with. Content creators achieve this through the flexible meaning-making of algorithms that preserves their self-worth, the underlying patterns of which the following section elaborates.

2.4.2 Algorithmic Imaginaries that Shield Self-Worth and the Contradictory Role of Opacity

Facing a threat to their self-worth, content creators manage to flexibly make meaning of algorithms in ways that help them shield their self-worth, which ironically is enabled by the very opacity of algorithms. Content creators, even if they are unable to acquire a complete, accurate understanding of algorithms, imagine the inner workings of this opaque technology. Their meaning-making crystallizes in the "imaginaries" of algorithms—how "people imagine, perceive, and experience algorithms" (Bucher, 2017, p. 31)—that explain how and why algorithms work the way they do. The 'stories' that workers tell of the technology enable them to grapple with algorithms, which might otherwise be too abstract or elusive to them (Anthony et

al., 2023). In this meaning-making, content creators have a certain level of flexibility given that algorithms are opaque and that they are unable to confirm or disconfirm these imaginaries. Content creators can be flexible not only in how they construct these imaginaries but also in how they draw from different imaginaries. This is especially true as content creators are aware that algorithms are constantly being updated, and their performance is updated in real time, compelling them to draw from different imaginaries as needed. This flexibility helps content creators make meaning of algorithms in ways that shield their self-worth.

Specifically, the underlying patterns of these imaginaries reveal how each achieves the preservation of content creators' self-worth. Through algorithmic imaginaries, content creators attribute bias and/or inconsistency to algorithms. First, the attribution of bias to algorithms is based on the idea that platforms pursue profits, potentially at the cost of content creators or even platform users, which comes to be reflected in the inner workings of algorithms that are biased against individual content creators like themselves. The accusation of bias in algorithms, therefore, shifts the blame of poor performance to platform corporations, ruthlessly chasing profits. Second, the attribution of inconsistency to algorithms is based on the idea that algorithms do not reflect the actions of platform users, the patterns of which they would be able to recognize and strategize. Inconsistency in algorithms, like bias, undermines the soundness of algorithmic mediation. The attribution of these two characteristics contributes to content creators discrediting how algorithms mediate engagement so that they can deflect blame for unsuccessful performance and preserve their sense of self-worth.

As a result of these attributions, four imaginaries—*unreliable, disadvantaging, contradictory,* and *instrumental*—emerge, depending on whether content creators attribute both bias and inconsistency, only bias, only inconsistency, or neither. These imaginaries vary in the degree to which they effectively undermine the soundness of algorithmic mediation and, thus, their effectiveness at shielding content creators' self-worth. Attributing both bias and inconsistency to algorithms offers the most protection for content creators' self-worth, followed by attributing only bias, attributing only inconsistency, and, lastly, attributing neither of the vices to algorithms. Figure 1 summarizes these four imaginaries, the relative darkness of the color indicating the relative strength of each imaginary as the shield for content creators' self-worth. In the rest of this section, I unpack each imaginary and describe how each imaginary orients content creators in their strategizing vis-à-vis algorithms.

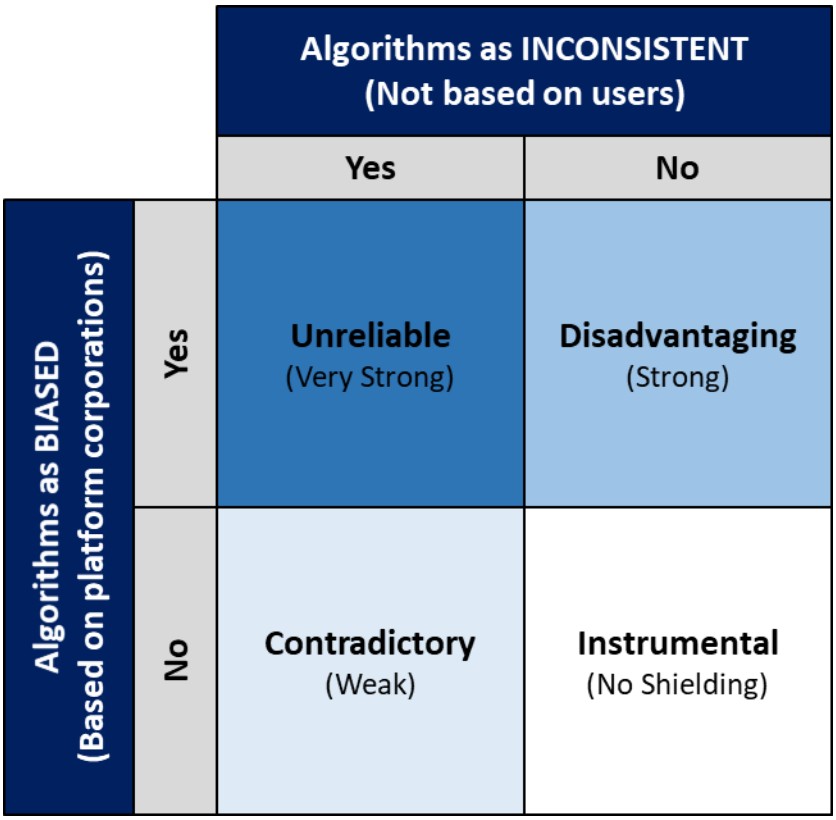

Figure 1. Imaginaries of Algorithms Based on Attribution of Bias and Inconsistency. The columns indicate whether content creators attribute inconsistency to algorithms in the imaginaries. The rows indicate whether they attribute bias to algorithms in the imaginaries. Attributing inconsistency and bias to algorithms help content creators shift blame upon poor performance. The darkness of color in the resulting four cells indicate the strength of each imaginary as a shield for content creators' self-worth.

2.4.2.1 Unreliable Algorithms: Attribution of Both Bias and Inconsistency to Algorithms

The *unreliable* imaginary of algorithms emerges when content creators attribute both bias and inconsistency to algorithms, which serves as a very strong shield for their self-worth, as both characteristics discredit algorithmic mediation. According to this imaginary, algorithms are *unreliable* because platform corporations constantly change algorithms to serve their interest and maximize profits, potentially at the cost of content creators and even platform users. This creates a precarious environment for content creators' work. Platform corporations' pursuit of profit is the sole basis of how algorithms work, to the point of excluding platform users' preferences, which is a source of consistency in algorithms; content creators also attribute inconsistency to algorithms through this imaginary. For instance, when Instagram shifted its focus from static pictures to short-form videos called Reels in response to TikTok's competition (Frier & Stone, 2022), it was met with an intense backlash from both creators and users. They demanded that

Instagram's parent company "make Instagram Instagram again," strongly voicing their belief that static pictures are at the core of the platform's identity (Huang, 2022). Content creators had to go through a significant transition in how they work as they switched to short-form video production, which required learning new skills because algorithms were not promoting static photo content.

As this example of the shift in Instagram's algorithms shows, content creators believe platform corporations' interest biases algorithms against them, and the workings of the technology are also disconnected from the consistent patterns of user behaviors on platforms. Therefore, algorithms become an unreliable technology mediating content creators' performance, changing frequently as platform corporations' interests evolve and making content creators' work precarious. A content creator's use of a metaphor comparing platforms to gambling "house" (I#37) effectively demonstrates this idea.

> … I look at the algorithm like **the house at a casino**. To try and beat the house, you might be able to do it a couple times, but unless you understand the algorithm truly, you're not [winning] in my opinion. **I know some people are like, "I figured it out," but they've created an algorithm for their benefit, the house, not necessarily for ours.** That's how I view it. **So I'm not trying to create it to try and beat the algorithm. ... I don't think it's very feasible. I think they're going to, and then they'll change it when they change it**. (I#37)

That the soundness of technology mediating content creators' performance is so profoundly questioned, to the extent platform corporations are compared to gambling houses, should offer a solid ground for content creators to disregard engagement that *unreliable* algorithms mediate.

Furthermore, content creators express a deep suspicion about the feasibility of "beating" algorithms (I#37), as in the quote above, with implications on how they strategize. The *unreliable* imaginary evokes in content creators sentiments of resentment and disaffection towards the technology governing their work. Conscious strategizing to beat algorithms appears futile in the light of the *unreliable* imaginary, which portrays algorithms as biased and inconsistent. Thus, this imaginary is commonly linked to the idea that trying to "cater to algorithms" is overly consuming for content creators and exhausts their creative drive (I#32). Instead of directly strategizing to beat the algorithms, content creators thus consider ways to

hedge themselves from the unreliability of the technology. They feel the necessity to be prepared for the potential "worst case scenario" (I#12) events, such as being shadow-banned by algorithms or their accounts being disabled because algorithms allegedly detected activities that "violate" community guidelines (W#207). Content creators also talk about securing alternative sources of income outside of the content creation—making "sure to not put all my eggs in the basket" (I#15).

Therefore, this imaginary portrays algorithms as unreliable, attributing bias and inconsistency to the technology, as content creators point their fingers at platform corporations for shaping algorithms with the sole goal of profit maximization at the cost of content creators and users. Drawing from this imaginary offers a very strong shield to content creators who can deflect blame for less-than-satisfactory performance to *unreliable* algorithms, instead of doubting the self-worth attached to their self-expression. This imaginary also orients content creators in their strategizing, evoking the sentiment of disaffection towards algorithms and urging them to pursue strategies of hedging themselves from the *unreliable* technology.

2.4.2.2 Disadvantaging Algorithms: Attribution of Bias but Not Inconsistency to Algorithms

The *disadvantaging* imaginary of algorithms emerges when content creators attribute bias but not inconsistency to algorithms, which serves as a strong shield for their self-worth. Although algorithms are biased, as was the case with the *unreliable* imaginary, algorithms are not inconsistent according to the *disadvantaging* imaginary, meaning content creators can blame the technology for its bias but not inconsistency. Whereas algorithms may be biased, content creators can understand the underlying consistency in the inner workings of algorithms, which means they should be capable of earning algorithms' favor. This shields content creators' self-worth through a moral criticism of algorithms yet does not eliminate the part played by content creators' self-expression in the resulting engagement. The idea behind the *disadvantaging* imaginary is that algorithms promote content that appeals to the masses—the "general public" (I#4) or "the major audience" (I#12)—and their lowest common denominator since platform corporations see promoting such content as the best way to serve their interest. When algorithms promote content with mass appeal, however, content creators argue that the technology disadvantages certain types of content creators like themselves—small creators, artistic/niche-targeting creators, and racial minority creators—whose work does not target the mainstream audience. In the quote below, a racial minority content creator elaborates:

> I would say for the past four to five months is **my channel's growth has been very slow**. … And I was like, what is it? **Is the algorithm biased? And I do believe the algorithm is biased**. And what I've figured out is this, and **I have no hardcore proof, but it makes sense.** The algorithm of YouTube is going to share videos based on **what they feel the major audience wants to see in that realm**. So for beauty, the largest demographic of people watching beauty videos is going to be women and particularly white women. So I think **the algorithm is programmed to show more white based or light based creators content first over people of color**. (I#12)

Implied in this disadvantaging imaginary, thus, is a divide between these content creators and others favored by the algorithms (i.e., large, unartistic, and racial majority creators). When content creators draw from this imaginary, they often complain that the latter category of content creators favored by algorithms have an unfair advantage. To illustrate, algorithms promote the content of racial majority content creators, as more audience will be consuming their content[5]. The same goes for large creators with an already established following and, thus, with a proven 'sales' power, as well as content creators who give up on the artistic side for a more general appeal. Therefore, on the flip side, creators draw from this imaginary to express the idea that the algorithms *disadvantage* them. The technology is "racist" (I#12), prefers mindless, "eye catching" content full of "grabby sounds" (I#9, I#43) and content produced by "the prettiest" (I#19) content creators "just trying to look hot" instead of presenting artistic looks (I#48). This moralizing undertone, along with the disapproval of algorithms catering to mass appeal as opposed to unfettered, authentic self-expression, is expressed in the following quote.

> And then in terms of the algorithm…. I just know it's not that great. And **it elevates things that may not morally ethically[sic] aligned, but it's what people want to see**. What's **spicy** and stuff like that, and it shoots out **who's the nicest to watch. Who's the prettiest**, blah, blah. And I mean, **I don't really like (algorithms) … because it is unfair, they push out a lot of people.** (I#19)

[5] There is a strong belief that, especially in the lifestyle content creation space, that similarity engenders engagement as audience needs to be able to see themselves in content creators to be engaged with their content.

Given this moral disapproval, the *disadvantaging* imaginary evokes dismay in strategizing vis-à-vis algorithms in content creators. This is because doing so means curving their self-expressions for the algorithms that they understand to be disadvantaging their valuable content, which they believe is more deserving than content from other content creators favored by algorithms. It does not mean they do not strategize vis-à-vis algorithms for success on the platforms. However, such strategizing becomes far less appealing and even morally tainted according to this imaginary. When content creators describe their strategizing to cater to algorithms, they express resentment that they have to do so by "mitigating" their artistic expressions for the "stupid" algorithms (I#43).

> **The worst part** is just create... I don't know. **The algorithm is so stupid, but you have to mitigate what you want to do and turn it into something that actually is seen**, which really is frustrating because **I don't like parameters like that, but it has me on here making like reels that are very eye catching and grabby and sounds** that I don't even care about and that's especially TikTok, so much of that. (I#43)

Similarly, content creators frequently express how they are acrimonious about having to play the numbers game because the field is rigged in ways that *disadvantage* them—which is "bizarre" and "ridiculous," and perhaps most importantly, antithetical to the "fun" (I#4) of engaging in creative self-expression.

Thus, the *disadvantaging* imaginary discredits algorithms like the *unreliable* imaginary. The technology, again, is to blame for poor engagement—biased algorithms that reflect platform corporations' interest in prioritizing the lowest common denominator of cultural consumption, serving the general public, are *disadvantaging* small, artistic/niche, and racial minority content creators. This helps content creators preserve their self-worth that comes under threat facing poor performance, even if the shielding might not be as strong as with the *unreliable* imaginary that attributes both bias and inconsistency to algorithms, rendering content creators' strategizing to earn algorithms' favor entirely infeasible. According to the *disadvantaging* imaginary, strategizing for successful performance, albeit morally questionable, should be feasible in most cases. Nonetheless, biased algorithms seem to remain a clear target to blame for content creators looking to preserve their self-worth.

2.4.2.3 Contradictory Algorithms: Attribution of Inconsistency but Not Bias to Algorithms

The *contradictory* imaginary emerges when content creators attribute inconsistency but not bias to algorithms, which serves as a weak shield for their self-worth. According to this imaginary, content creators do not see bias in algorithms, yet they are unable to read consistent patterns based on platform user behaviors that they can recognize and strategize around. This imaginary expresses the idea that algorithms *contradict* content creators' expectations of their performance or even that performance is negatively correlated with their expectations. Therefore, the *contradictory* imaginary does shield content creators' self-worth to some extent because algorithms can still be faulted for poor performance. However, its effectiveness as a shield for content creators' self-worth is relatively weak compared to that of the *unreliable* and the *disadvantaging* imaginaries, which offered concrete actors behind the inner workings of algorithms for content creators to blame—platform corporations ruthlessly pursuing their interest or users with their mainstream taste in content. As the *contradictory* imaginary remains abstract and offers little ground for why algorithms work the way they do, its effectiveness at shielding content creators' self-worth seems relatively limited.

More specifically, this imaginary portrays algorithms as *contradicting* content creators' expectations of their performance in both directions, sometimes over-rewarding and under-rewarding at other times. On the one hand, content that they expect to perform well 'flops,' and on the other hand, content that they do not expect to perform well—what they created just for "fun" (I#16), "spending 10 minutes" (I#40)—go viral. However, what often bothers content creators is that content performance can be underwhelming compared to their expectations, which form based on two factors. First, they base their expectations on their judgment of how valuable a specific content is given the effort that went into producing the content. Content creators frequently bring up how strange it is that the reward from algorithms is even negatively correlated with "efforts" that go into producing content—"we'll talk a lot about how if you put a lot of effort into a video it's probably not going to do that well." (I#4) A content creator who also works at a radio station managing other content creators says:

> I sat in a meeting with about 40 other XXX [radio station he works for] content creators in Florida last week, one of our better creators was talking about **how they'll spend hours on a particular piece of content that ends up going nowhere. But the one that they spend 10 minutes on goes viral, 40,000 people are viewing it.** I'm still discovering

> the exact mix between quality and quantity. … **So I don't recommend people spend all day trying to set up the perfect post. It's a recipe for making yourself crazy.** (I#40)

Second, content creators also base their expectations for performance on the previous success of similar content they were trying to replicate, a common strategy among content creators.

> … my two most popular videos, actually, my three highest ranking videos are all graphic liner related. … So, I tried making more videos after that, though, which is interesting because **they say if you have a video that gets picked up, make a similar video right away. So, I did, but then that video didn't do well right away… YouTube is hard to follow. So, I try not to focus on the views** too too much if it's a topic like that. (I#14)

That algorithms contradict not only content creators' value judgment of content but also the technology's own previous patterns of mediation further helps content creators discredit algorithms.

Similar to the *unreliable* imaginary, the *contradictory* imaginary attributing inconsistency to algorithms implies that it is futile to strategize to earn algorithms' favor for success on platforms. Indeed, blaming oneself for poor performance and trying to perfect content for better engagement would be "a recipe for making yourself crazy" (I#40) if algorithms are *contradictory*. However, whereas this almost "magical reasoning" in the face of an opaque technology (Anthony et al., 2023, p. 6) might still offer some consolation to content creators, it also appears that this imaginary's ability to orient content creators in their strategizing and to shield content creators' self-worth, can be limited. That algorithms are *contradictory* provides little ground for content creators to act upon. In fact, content creators drawing from this imaginary, close to magical reasoning, might indicate the level of discomfort in dealing with the opaque technology governing their self-expression.

2.4.2.4 Instrumental Algorithms: Attribution of Neither Bias nor Inconsistency

Lastly, the *instrumental* imaginary of algorithms emerges when content creators attribute neither of the vices to algorithms, thus not serving as a shield for their self-worth. This imaginary differs from the rest in that content creators use it in relation to successful performance when

their self-worth is not under threat. That this imaginary does not discredit algorithms means content creators can credit themselves for their successful performance, echoing what we know about the self-serving bias in causal inference—individuals tend to see themselves as the source of success (Heider, 1958; Miller & Ross, 1975). Drawing from this imaginary, content creators express the idea that algorithms are, in fact, consistent, as the inner workings of technology reflect platform users' recognizable patterns of behaviors on platforms. While this was also the case with the *disadvantaging* imaginary, in that case, the bias in algorithms meant that consistency was coming from the lowest common denominator of cultural consumption, catering to which was portrayed as morally questionable. However, drawing from the *instrumental* imaginary, content creators portray the consistent patterns of user behaviors as neutral, a basis they can utilize for successful strategizing vis-à-vis algorithms.

Content creators emphasize the underlying patterns of user behaviors that they argue they learned to exploit so that their content benefits from the expanded outreach from algorithms promoting it. This imaginary often revolves around technical details from "existing research" (I#34) that circulate the online world (i.e., 'algorithmic gossip,' Bishop, 2019). These details on how to be "picked up by algorithms" often focus on non-substantive aspects of content production that would boost content's outreach based on the "human psychology" behind algorithmic mediation (I#36). Engagement gaming most effectively exemplifies the strategies that content creators might use to gain algorithms' favor through their understanding of "human psychology," which involves practices to increase the initial engagement for a following algorithmic "boost" (I#36). The idea is that engineering initial engagement accelerates further audience engagement, which makes algorithms believe that the respective content is popular and trending, therefore promoting it. For the initial engagement, creators actively respond to early comments, waking up an hour early to post before work for a "power hour" (I#17) to respond to as many comments as possible (I#29). Content creators also try to generate engagement for other creators they have a relationship with, turning notifications on for those creators' content posting, which is considered an expression of "support" (I#30) that is often reciprocated.

It is also possible that these strategies quickly take more sinister turns, becoming closer to what platforms would label illegitimate system-gaming (Petre et al., 2019). Some content creators join small Facebook groups known as 'pods' (O'Meara, 2019), where the members who mostly do not know each other reciprocally engage with one another's content. These pods can

be especially useful for content creators starting with little access to other content creators who can help with initial engagement (I#12). Another content creator explains that his strategy for "blowing up" social media content is all about "a psychology game," which often involves paying others to engage with some of his content. When aiming for high impact, he plans ahead by lining up his network of high-profile content creators so that they would engage with his content as soon as he posts and pay them about $10 for each "like" to a post (FN#2). While it can seem like a small amount of money, liking a post takes a single click. This initial engagement signals to the viewers that "they should also engage with it," and increases the chance that algorithms will pick it up and go viral—"help(ing) it hit those next levels" (I#36). On the most extreme end, content creators can outright purchase bot-generated engagement (I#21).

When content creators feel that they have "cracked the code" (I#54) and are drawing from the *instrumental* imaginary, they express surprisingly little resentment towards having to curve their self-expression to cater to algorithms, which was the case with the *disadvantaging* imaginary. They show little resentment even when they feel they need to deprioritize specific types of content that they enjoy creating. For instance, Interviewee #39 explains how she is unable to express her interests in diverse areas because "if you're talking about all kinds of different things, they (algorithms) might not necessarily know where to categorize you." She also is prioritizing YouTube over Instagram, although she "love(s) making Reel" (short-form video content on Instagram). The fact that platforms with robust search algorithms are enabling her to monetize her content for long after the uploading of the content made her "fall in love with the searchable platforms" anew rather than resent how she does not have time to make short-form video content that she "love(s) making." Given the narrative of authentic self-expression on these platforms, such a lack of negative sentiment towards algorithms curving content creators' creative intents distinguishes this imaginary.

Therefore, content creators seem to draw from this imaginary when there is no need to shield their self-worth given successful performance, engaging in active strategizing vis-à-vis algorithms with little resentment over being judged at the "court of the algorithmic appeal" (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016). Not biased nor inconsistent, algorithms are portrayed as credible mediators of their performance whose inner workings, rightfully, reflect the recognizable patterns of user behaviors. At the same time, however, it is important to be reminded that this imaginary, like others, is transient. The continuous nature of feedback content creators encounter

on social media platforms and the fact that algorithms are constantly being updated means content creators are bound to experience falling performance over time, needing to shield their self-worth against the opaque technology.

2.5 Discussion

How do platform workers make meaning of opaque algorithms mediating their success? This study investigated how a distinct type of platform workers who consider their work to be a form of self-expression engage in meaning-making of the opaque technology. The findings of this study emphasize content creators' need to preserve their self-worth in their meaning-making, facing opaque algorithms that generate unpredictability in their performance. Content creators make meaning of opaque algorithms by imagining the inner workings of the technology. In their meaning-making, content creators are able to shield their sense of self-worth by attributing bias and inconsistency to algorithms so that they can discredit the technology and deflect blame when their performance falters. This reveals a contradictory role of algorithmic opacity in content creators' work. While the opacity of algorithms is a source of frustration for content creators who are unable to decipher how their success is mediated, it also allows for flexibility in content creators' algorithmic imaginaries—which is leveraged for the preservation of their self-worth. These findings further our understanding of how platform workers make meaning of algorithms. These findings also have implications on the role of technology in amplifying negative consequences of a close coupling between work and self, as well as platform firms' use of opaque algorithms to control workers. I discuss the implications of my findings.

2.5.1 Implications on our understanding of workers' meaning-making of algorithms

My findings have multiple implications on our understanding of workers' meaning-making of algorithms. First, they contribute to the literature on platform work by showing the underlying patterns of workers' meaning-making and that the opacity of algorithms can allow for flexibility in their meaning-making. Prior studies have shown that workers mainly experience algorithms as a source of control, with their opacity contributing to the constraints. By focusing on how platforms use algorithms to control "rhythms and methods of human labor" (Braverman, 1998; Vallas & Schor, 2020, p. 278), they show that the inability of workers to discern the inner workings of algorithms can limit their effective resistance against the technology (Rahman, 2021; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Thus, opacity was found to help platforms maintain the power

asymmetry exercised through algorithms. More broadly, this is aligned with the idea that understanding of technology is a source of power; those on the receiving end of 'black box' technologies are unable to question the assumptions built into the design (Kitchin & Dodge, 2011), having to accept the technology unquestioningly. This blind acceptance of technology can have long-term negative consequences, such as hindering the development of expertise in knowledge workers (e.g., Anthony, 2021).

The findings of my study, however, demonstrate that opacity, in fact, can offer flexibility and room for workers to exercise their agency through meaning-making. Given the opacity, there is little ground to confirm nor disconfirm their imaginaries, and 'stories' about the technology (Anthony et al., 2023) can be told in ways that preserve workers' self-worth. Instead of being wedded to a specific imaginary, content creators draw from multiple imaginaries and make different meanings of the technology depending on the explanations they seek. In that sense, they resemble a repertoire (Swidler, 1986) of justifications for their work products' performance, a set of stories maintained due to algorithms' opacity. Therefore, adding to the role of opacity in constraining the actions of workers, shifting the focus to the meaning-making of algorithms unveils a new role of opacity in enabling different imaginaries—some essential to preserving workers' self-worth.

Second, it adds to our understanding of platform work by identifying systematic patterns in workers' meaning-making of algorithms. Prior research has addressed some variations in how workers make meanings of algorithms, but they are often dichotomous, and workers do not draw from them flexibly. For example, Cameron (2022) identifies two ways of thinking about algorithms—malevolent and benevolent—In relation to two types of workplace games played by ride-hail drivers. In addition, these ways of thinking about algorithms appear static in her context, so workers see algorithms as either malevolent or benevolent. In my study, I find the underlying patterns of the imaginaries based on the perception of bias and inconsistency, each relating to a different concrete actor (i.e., platform corporations and users). Whether each of these two characteristics is attributed to algorithms offers the basis for four imaginaries. Moreover, content creators do not settle with a specific imaginary because they are navigating a terrain of continuous updates in engagement metrics and algorithms. Given the conditions of their work, it seems fitting that content creators draw from multiple imaginaries in a transient manner.

Furthermore, there are glimpses of how these imaginaries might affect workers' strategic engagement with algorithms for their success on platforms. Each imaginary in the repertoire seems to orient content creators by engendering particular affect towards algorithms, with potential consequences on their strategizing and, thus, future performance depending on which imaginaries they draw from frequently. As we have seen, the *unreliable* imaginary is linked to the *disaffected* attitude towards algorithms, and the strategies for reducing the precarity caused by the algorithms. *Disadvantaging* imaginary is linked to the *dismayed* attitude regarding having to please algorithms by producing content that is "not morally ethically [sic] aligned" with them (I#12); even if they engage in strategizing for better performance, this imaginary evokes the feeling of moral taint in doing so. This starkly contrasts the affect associated with *instrumental* imaginary, which is linked to the directed sense of strategically engaging with algorithms. It is possible that early-stage failures or simply the human tendency to expect successful performance for themselves (Parducci, 1963, 1965) incline workers to find their performance dissatisfactory and antagonize algorithms, drawing from *unreliable*, *disadvantaging,* or *contradictory* imaginaries more frequently. The negative affect experienced with those imaginaries could hinder workers from actively strategizing to earn algorithms' favor compared to when they are drawing from *instrumental* imaginary, for example, with potential long-term consequences on their performance. It is also possible that frequently drawing from *unreliable* imaginary is associated with a reduction in content creators' contribution to platforms, as they are oriented towards hedging strategies that would shield them from the effects of *unreliable* algorithms. At the same time, this could make working as content creators more sustainable, making them stay on platforms over a longer period of time. Therefore, my findings call for further investigation into the long-term consequences of these imaginaries on content creators' performance and strategizing.

Finally, these findings raise questions about where these imaginaries come from and what the antecedents of the repertoire could be. Regarding platform corporations' role in shaping algorithms as content creators attribute bias to the technology, for example, it appears to become salient with content creators' operation across multiple platforms. Cross-platform operations make content creators aware of different algorithm designs and, therefore, seem to trigger the thought that platforms can design algorithms with different goals. Also, content creators frequently mention platforms' practices of charging for algorithmic boosts as the reasoning

behind seeing platforms' active role in not only shaping algorithms but also doing so to serve their corporate interests. These practices make it easier for content creators to blame platforms for their ruthless pursuit of profit over promoting content worthy of user attention and vilify the platforms. When it comes to the users' role in giving consistency to algorithms, for example, it seems to become more salient with content creators' exposure to detailed user data provided by the platforms and the fact that content creators themselves have the experience of being in the users' shoes. Content creators often confess that they spend "way too much time" on social media (I#35) watching other people's content as users themselves, as well as describing their motivation of starting in this field as one day realizing that they "could do it too" (I#14)—they felt as users, there was little difference between them and content creators. The blurring of the line between being the content producer and consumer, which is an important feature of social media platforms (Burgess & Green, 2018; Poell et al., 2021), makes it easier for content creators to assume that they would see consistency in algorithms if the technology reflected user behaviors and preferences on the platforms.

2.5.2 Implications on our understanding of the tight coupling between the self and the work

These findings also contribute to our understanding of the tight coupling between the self and the work (e.g., Pratt & Ashforth, 2003), especially outside of the traditional organizational setting, and the role of technology in potentially amplifying the negative consequences of the coupling. Recent work in management points out that with the rising number of workers operating outside the organizational context, workers' 'selves' have become an increasingly important source of meaning at work (Ashford et al., 2018; Cropanzano et al., 2023). Work becomes a personal "avenue for self-expression" (Petriglieri et al., 2019, p. 136), a critical element that constitutes the self (Fayard, 2021). Instead of celebrating workers as "free agents" (Pink, 2001), finally emancipated from organizational constraints that often suppress personal selves, studies on independent workers warn us of the potential issues that come with the close coupling between the self and work (Ashforth et al., 2008). For example, Petriglieri et al. (2019) show that workers may experience emotional tensions from having their selves at stake (i.e., "when you become your work," p. 137)—reflected in the oscillation between the heightened sense of fulfillment from being productive and the severe anxiety from being unproductive.

My work echoes these warnings and sheds light on the role of opaque technology—algorithms—that could amplify some negative consequences, such as a threat to self-worth. Accounting for the role of algorithms can be meaningful given that, increasingly, work arrangements outside of traditional organizations take place on platforms governed by algorithms. I find that the opacity of the technology and the subsequent unpredictability in their work performance, so closely tied to their sense of self-worth, amplify the anxiety and frustration of workers. Thus, it becomes challenging to workers to be left in the dark about the inner workings of the technology, whose mediation is so critical for their success. Moreover, algorithms operate in tandem with quantified evaluations (Kellogg et al., 2020), a known driver of anxiety (e.g., Espeland & Sauder, 2016), the effect of which on workers can be further strengthened by the opacity of algorithms. Given these points, it should be little surprise, given these points, that the opaque technology becomes the "thorn of … existence" for workers (I#12) who are attuned to their quantified performance and needing need to defend their self-worth.

At the same time, my findings also reveal how workers might cope with the negative consequences of the tight coupling between their selves and work, amplified by the opaque technology, by engaging in a flexible meaning-making of the technology. The frustration and anxiety from having their self-worth under threat are projected in the way content creators deflect blame to algorithms. The emerging imaginaries, which are neither confirmed nor disconfirmed given the opacity of algorithms, help with the preservation of their self-worth. They allow their self-worth to be disassociated from the unpredictable performance, mediated by the opaque technology, as a way in which a negative consequence of the tight coupling between the self and work can be mitigated. Yet, this is with a caveat that the benefits of this coping in the long term can still be questionable, as workers might face continuous pressure for quantified performance and get their "head stuck" with the numbers (I#1). The anecdotal evidence of prevalent burnouts of content creators (e.g., Alexander, 2019; Lorenz, 2021), might be pointing to how difficult it can be to escape the frustration and anxiety of their success being mediated by opaque algorithms despite the flexible meaning-making.

2.5.3 Implications on our understanding of platform firms' use of algorithms to control workers

This study has implications on our understanding of platform firms' use of opaque algorithms to control workers. Prior work has suggested that the opacity of algorithms can be used to create and maintain power asymmetry for effective control of workers (Gandini, 2019; Jarrahi et al., 2021; Kellogg et al., 2020). As platform firms are keen on maintaining their legal status as non-employers—and workers as independent contractors—they are unable to use measures of direct control as organizations could; they instead are using algorithmic automation and power asymmetry to exert indirect control on workers (Gandini, 2019; Rahman, 2021). Therefore, platforms, in part, intentionally keep algorithms opaque to prevent workers from gaming the system (Burrell, 2016), which some scholars believe is even more constraining to workers than being under the conditions of direct control in organizations (Rahman, 2021).

My findings suggest, however, that using opaque algorithms to control workers might negatively impact workers' perception of the technology and the platform firms. Platform workers, imagining the inner workings of algorithms in the void of clear understanding, seem to vilify platform corporations and assume the ruthless exercise of corporate interest at the expense of their workers—likening the platforms to the gambling house (I#37). They antagonize the platform firms as the source of bias in algorithms. Platform firms are portrayed as shaping algorithms to propagate content that caters to the low taste of the general public (*disadvantaging* imaginary) or driven with the sole goal of maximizing profit, turning blind eyes to the users' and content creators' demand (*unreliable* imaginary). Also, discrediting algorithms and antagonizing platforms behind those algorithms are linked to negative affective responses, such as disaffection (*unreliable* imaginary) and dismay (*disadvantaging* imaginary), in workers.

While future work can address the long-term consequences of the imaginaries on platforms' strategy and performance, these sentiments towards engaging with algorithms for better performance seem to be the opposite of what platforms are attempting to achieve with gamification of the performance metrics. These sentiments seem to indicate the potential effects of opaque algorithms in dwindling workers' motivation to contribute to these platforms over time. It can be discouraging for workers to feel that the technology mediating their success is biased against them to serve the profit-maximizing motivation of platform corporations, sometimes even deprioritizing users' preferences. This is also echoed in other contexts. For example, ride-hail drivers saw little prospect of success on the platforms and felt discouraged when they believed that algorithms were "out to get them" (Cameron, 2022, p. 243).

Additionally, platforms' gamification of the performance metrics, when performance is mediated by algorithms, can have effects that cancel out the motivating effects it can have on workers. This is because while gamification might motivate workers to contribute further to platforms by generating anxiety, it could also overly exacerbate the pressure for workers whose sense of self-worth is tied to their performance. Such pressure can further push workers to engage in the imaginaries that discredit the algorithms to deflect blame from their selves for poor performance. Therefore, it appears that overt capitalization of algorithmic opacity for worker control might not be an effective or sustainable strategy for platforms that need to attract workers and motivate them to contribute.

2.6 Conclusion

This study sets out to explore how a distinct group of platform workers, social media content creators, make meaning of algorithms as they consider their work to be a form of self-expression. I demonstrate that opaque algorithms that generate unpredictability in the performance of content creators' self-expression, associated with their self-worth, become a source of frustration for them. By identifying the underlying patterns of their meaning-making of algorithms based on attributing two characteristics, bias and inconsistency, I show that content creators can imagine the inner workings of the technology in ways that preserve their self-worth even when their performance falters. This reveals the role of opacity in enabling flexible meaning-making, in addition to its constraining role, which previous studies of platform workers have focused on. I believe these findings have implications on how platform workers experience opaque algorithms and how platform firms use opaque algorithms to control workers, as well as raising questions about the potential negative consequences of the close coupling between workers' selves and work.

Chapter 3
The Pursuit of Meaningful Work on Platforms: Cultural Discourse on Ideal Work(er) and Authenticity

3.1 Introduction

The pursuit of meaningfulness in work has long fascinated scholars across disciplines, tracking back to classical thinkers like Weber (1980) with his conceptualization of "calling" at work. It also remains a central focus in organizational scholarship—"how individuals find meaning in the economic sphere…arguably one of the most important questions for organizational scholarship" (Podolny et al., 2004, p. 1). Organizational scholars have explored different individual and work characteristics, such as those that foster a sense of self-efficacy (e.g., autonomy and control) that could lead to individuals experiencing work as meaningful and worthy (Rosso et al., 2010). At the same time, individuals are capable of engaging in meaning-making in ways that produce accounts that justify their work as meaningful and worthy (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017) even in situations where meaningfulness might be unlikely (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Critical to such meaning-making is the role of social processes such as sensegiving and sensemaking (e.g., Pratt, 2000; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Organizational scholars have focused on how the immediate organizational context, such as organizational goals (Podolny et al., 2004), interactions with leaders and managers (Carton, 2018; Grant, 2007; Grant & Parker, 2009), interactions with co-workers (Pratt, 2000; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003), and formal organizational practices (Beer et al., 2022), shape individuals' experience of work as meaningful and worthy.

However, relatively scarce attention has been paid to the role of cultural ideas on individuals' experience of work as meaningful, compared to the role of organizational context and individual characteristics (Rosso et al., 2010). Cultural discourses on the society and field level can profoundly influence how individuals engage in the meaning-making of their work and its worthiness, which studies with sociological perspectives have demonstrated (e.g., Lamont, 1992, 2009). In the management field, a handful of studies explore the role of discursive

practices within organizations that foster meaningfulness in work. For example, Carton (2018) focuses on how President Kennedy, as the leader of NASA, discursively connected the everyday small tasks of NASA employees to the loftier goal of "putting a man on the moon," infusing them with meaningfulness. Nonetheless, these studies rarely highlight the role that broader cultural discourses play in individual workers' experiences of meaningfulness (for exception, see Florian et al., 2019). This is surprising given that how individuals navigate the world of meaning in organizational contexts and the role of cultural discourses in such navigation are generally well-examined in the broader management literature. In particular, studies investigating how actors tell stories that resonate (e.g., actors within organizations or entrepreneurs) refer to the actors' ability to tap into existing discourses on the societal and field level (e.g., Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; McPherson & Sauder, 2013).

Understanding the role of cultural discourses in workers' experiences of meaningfulness might be particularly germane given the evolving landscape of work, where workers have to operate in the absence of organizational and relational forces that orient them in their experience of meaningfulness. Technological advancements, such as those in information communication technology (ICT) and algorithmic technology, are facilitating work arrangements outside of traditional organizations, decentralizing and automating the coordination of work (Vallas & Schor, 2020). These changes, exemplified by platform-mediated work, challenge the previous assumptions about the organizational and relational dynamics underpinning the experiences of meaningful work in traditional work settings (Ashford et al., 2018; Cropanzano et al., 2023). This could emphasize the role of cultural discourses as individuals grapple with the meaning of their work in the void of more immediate organizational forces. Indeed, these changes are supported by the cultural discourses that idealize the image of workers embodying the entrepreneurial spirit as individualized, autonomous, risk-taking, and creative 'doers' who are looking to express their 'authentic' selves in their work (Neff, 2012; Rosenblat, 2018). Therefore, exploring the role of these cultural discourses in platform-mediated work can further our understanding of individuals' experience of their work as meaningful and worthy.

In this paper, I explore the role of a specific cultural discourse in how individuals doing a specific type of platform-mediated work—social media content creators—experience meaningfulness in work. Like other platform workers, most social media content creators operate as individual agents outside the bounds of work organization. In addition, content creators' work

is a context where the role of cultural discourses is accentuated. Similarly to other cultural producers and those working in creative industries, content creators find value in the symbolic appeals that render their work—'cool' jobs in 'hot' industries—meaningful (Neff et al., 2005). In particular, content creators demonstrate the power of the cultural discourse that idealizes 'doing what they love' for work so that work becomes a form of workers' *authentic self-expression*, as an increasing number of workers subscribe to them (Cech, 2021; Duffy, 2017). This discourse is ubiquitous and is widely accepted in content creators' work, who embody and frequently draw from this discourse (Duffy, 2017). Of course, the reality of content creators' workers is far more complicated, as many of them experience precarity[6] in their navigation of the market forces without the buffer that standard jobs used to provide (Schor, 2020). In the case of content creators, the appeal of doing work that they see as a form of authentic self-expression is so powerful that they even engage in work that is often not directly compensated, labeled as 'aspirational labor' to build and maintain their reputation among audience bases with the hope of future reward (Duffy, 2017). With these characteristics, content creators represent a potent case to examine the role of cultural discourses in how individuals experience meaningfulness in work—how they might draw from cultural discourses that are available to them when engaging in the meaning-making of their work, to what consequences on their experience of meaningfulness in work.

The findings of this paper are threefold. First, I find content creators participate in constructing a "myth" that is widely accepted in the field of content creation and strongly appeals to content creators. This myth echoes the broader cultural discourse that emphasizes the value of authenticity at work yet goes a step further by connecting authentic self-expression to market success. Thus, the myth pushes a step further the cultural discourse that idealizes work that 'allows' for individuals' authentic self-expression by establishing authentic self-expression as the very basis of success. Second, the reality of content creators' work is such that the experiences of friction between the pursuit of authenticity and success are inevitable. Despite the 'overnight' success stories where completely unassuming individuals go viral and find stardom, in most cases, content creators' success hinges on their effort to appeal to their audience and the market. The experiences of friction are particularly prominent among content creators who are

[6] Precarious work is work that is "uncertain, unpredictable, and risky" for workers (Kalleberg, 2008: 2)

actively aiming to grow and those who have experienced substantial growth. Third, instead of these experiences of friction leading them to reject the myth of authenticity 'naturally' leading to success, content creators offer accounts of justification and engage in boundary work. These efforts allow content creators to maintain their self-perception of authenticity, a critical source of meaningfulness in their work, and allow the myth to persist despite its contradictions.

This study makes three contributions. First, this study contributes to the literature on how workers experience meaningfulness by highlighting the role of cultural discourses. While previous management studies on workers' experiences focus on the organizational and relational processes, cultural discourses can have a profound influence on workers' experience of meaning and worthiness in work (Lamont, 2009). This might be especially true in the new landscape of work where the assumptions about organizational and relational processes no longer hold (Cropanzano et al., 2023; Petriglieri et al., 2019). Second, this study furthers our understanding of platform-mediated work. Existing research demonstrates that platforms function as 'shadow employers' (Friedman, 2014), portraying their technologies as solutions to the 9-to-5 drudgery (Rosenblat, 2018; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). My findings suggest that workers might cling to the promise of platform-mediated work reflecting those cultural discourses despite contradictions, continuing to engage in meaning-making of their work in line with the cultural discourses. Third, this study contributes to the literature on authenticity at work. Previous studies examine how individuals' experiences of authenticity shape their overall work experiences and its downstream effects, with a recent focus on the 'dark side' of authenticity (Cha et al., 2019; Hewlin et al., 2020; Ibarra, 2015). My findings reveal that a strong emphasis on authenticity can indeed create an unrealistic demand on individuals, yet this demand might also prompt meaning-making that maintains the emphasis on authenticity, despite those frictions that might otherwise compromise the experience of authenticity.

3.2 Theory

3.2.1 Meaningful Work

Individuals experience their work as meaningful and worthy when it is significant to them and believe it contributes to a purpose (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). The importance of meaningful work is widely recognized from both organizational and worker perspectives, with management literature developing two distinct approaches to understanding it. The first and

predominant approach conceptualizes meaningful work at the individual level, focusing on psychological perspectives (Rosso et al., 2010). Workers' individual orientation, characteristics of the work itself, and the fit between the two influence their experience of work as meaningful. For instance, individuals who value work as a central domain of their lives are more likely to see their work as meaningful (i.e., 'work involvement' or 'work centrality,' Kanungo, 1982; MOW International Research Team, 1987). Work that allows for autonomy, competence, and relatedness is more likely to foster meaningfulness in work (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and so is the congruence between one's self-concept and work activities (M. Cardador et al., 2006). According to these perspectives, the experience of meaningfulness in work is an objective that could be 'realized' (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017), especially by finding the 'right' work or shifting work conditions and practices in ways that are conducive to meaningfulness (e.g., 'job design' or 'job crafting,' Grant, 2007; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

The second approach focuses on the immediate social environment of workers, acknowledging that meaning—and thus meaningfulness—is socially constructed (e.g., Pratt, 2000; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). This approach highlights the role of organizational and relational processes influencing workers' meaning-making of their work and, thus, their experience of meaningfulness. The role of organizational missions and how leaders and managers infuse workers with those missions (Carton, 2018; Grant & Parker, 2009; Podolny et al., 2004), and how coworkers and the surrounding communities (Bechky, 2003; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003), are thus highlighted. By taking a constructivist angle, this approach explains how, even in work contexts where meaningfulness might seem unlikely based on the work conditions, workers can experience meaningfulness if organizational and relational elements facilitate their meaning-making to 'justify' meaningfulness in their work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Muirhead, 2004). A critical perspective suggests that management can 'engineer' a sense of meaningfulness to enhance workers' performance (May et al., 2004), pushing workers to tolerate sub-standard work conditions and accept sacrifices (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; T. Cardador & Caza, 2012).

Despite the understanding that meaning-making is inherently social, the role of available cultural discourses in the experience of meaningful work has received relatively little attention in management literature, apart from some cross-cultural comparisons (Rosso et al., 2010). Cultural discourses at the society and field level can fundamentally inform individual-level meaning-

making, serving as a repertoire for individuals and organizations, which has long been of interest to sociologists (Swidler, 1986). Specifically, in meaning-making related to work, Lamont (2009) demonstrates how American working-class men draw on discourses of individualism and hard work to find worthiness in their work and their selves, in contrast to their French counterparts who draw on discourses of solidarity and equality. In the field of management, recent studies like Florian et al. (2019) demonstrate how shifting societal discourse on the meaningfulness of volunteer work in a German refuge shelter served as a "point of reference" for framing their work as meaningful, highlighting the power of cultural discourses. These studies indicate that available cultural discourses can serve as a basis of meaning-making from which individuals and organizations draw, thus playing a significant role in how meaningfulness in work comes to be experienced.

3.2.2 New Landscape of Work and the Cultural Discourses Around Ideal Work(ers)

In the new landscape of work, the question of how meaning-making happens—and meaningfulness is experienced—becomes even more prominent and pressing. Advancements in information communication technologies and algorithmic technologies are increasingly decentralizing work, enabling alternative work arrangements to traditional organizations. Workers no longer need to be bound to specific times and places for their work (Gandini, 2019), as coordination of work can occur through, for example, algorithms that automate matching the demand for and the supply of work (Kellogg et al., 2020). Platform-mediated work epitomizes these changes, echoing the trend of decreasing long-term employment and the 'death of the corporation,' accelerated by technological advancements (Barley & Kunda, 2001; Davis, 2016; Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018). Digital platforms mediate a diverse array of work, coordinating work itself or distributing work products involving gig workers, crowd workers or micro-taskers, and content creators (Vallas & Schor, 2020). These workers are not formal employees of the platforms, operating in decentralized environments where traditional managerial control is absent (Friedman, 2014; Gandini, 2019).

This new landscape raises questions regarding how workers construct meaning regarding their work and thus experience meaningfulness, disrupting assumptions about organizational and relational processes (Ashford et al., 2018; Cropanzano et al., 2023). Disembedded from immediate organizational contexts (e.g., having no co-workers or managers) and often working

in isolation, these workers could face unique challenges—needing to establish meaningfulness based on alternative mechanisms (e.g., creating personal 'holding' environments by connecting to other constants in work such as routines, Petriglieri et al., 2019). Some evidence suggests that these workers are influenced by and have to individually process shifts in cultural discourses about their work (e.g., public moralization, Cameron et al., 2022).

At the same time, these changes reflect the cultural discourses about what constitutes 'ideal' work that is meaningful and worthy of pursuit. Cultural discourses accompanying and contributing to platform-mediated work gaining traction are complex but can be summarized as follows: Individuals should embody the entrepreneurial spirit, seeking work that enables creativity through autonomy and flexibility, thereby allowing authentic self-expression that makes work meaningful and worthy (Fayard, 2021; Fleming, 2009; Neff, 2012; Rosenblat, 2018). These discourses resonate with multiple interrelated discourses, including entrepreneurialism (e.g., Caliskan & Lounsbury, 2022) and passionate work (e.g., Cech, 2021), representing a departure from the archetype of the 'organizational man' and corporate jobs as the standard, if not the ideal, of work(ers) (Gill, 2013).[7] These cultural discourses influence how workers experience the meaningfulness and worthiness of their work and their self-conception (e.g., Neff, 2012). Platform companies heavily lean into these discourses to attract workers, promoting their technologies as solutions to the 9-to-5 drudgery of corporate jobs (Rosenblat, 2018; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Indeed, these discourses circulate ubiquitously in society, and evidence suggests that workers in various settings embrace them, even when promises regarding authentic self-expression are unlikely to be fulfilled (e.g., micro-taskers, Kost et al., 2018).

However, recent empirical studies highlight the gap between the promises and realities of platform-mediated work. Workers often face precarious conditions as platforms shift risks to workers and punt responsibilities typically borne by formal employers, such as providing worker benefits (Ravenelle, 2019; Schor et al., 2020). Furthermore, platforms rely on third-party evaluation metrics, fine-grained data collected on activities taking place on platforms, and algorithms to control workers, significantly restricting their autonomy and flexibility (Curchod et al., 2020; Kellogg et al., 2020; Rahman, 2021; Zuboff, 2019). What remains unclear is how

[7] As Gill (2013) notes, these archetypes do not apply equally to all members of society. A critical examination of these archetypes of work(ers) has made clear that these archetypes exclude some members of society and are not equally convincing to everyone across different social groups.

workers engage in the meaning-making of their work by drawing on these cultural discourses amid such discrepancies. This study explores how widely accepted cultural discourses about the ideal type of work, epitomized by platform-mediated work, play a role in workers' experiences of meaningfulness.

3.3 Research Context and Design

3.3.1 Context: Lifestyle Content Creation

Social media content creators provide an ideal case to explore the role cultural discourses idealizing authenticity play in individuals' experience of meaningfulness in work amidst the disparity between platform work's promises and realities. As cultural producers on platforms, like others in creative industries, content creators find symbolic appeal and derive meaningfulness from their work to the extent that their work is their 'passion' despite the risks and instability involved (Duffy, 2017; Neff et al., 2005). Becoming a content creator is considered a viable alternative pathway to entering cultural production, a path that social media platforms have 'democratized' by offering opportunities to nearly everyone with minimal access to necessary technologies (Burgess & Green, 2018; Turner, 2010). The anecdotes about high-profile 'overnight' success from ordinary individuals and the emphasis on authentic self-expression fostering the sense of 'relatability' in the audience contribute to the perception of content creation as a feasible career option. This stands in contrast to traditional careers in cultural production, at least in theory, where success historically favored a select few, suggesting a 'democratization' of opportunity (Abidin, 2018; Duffy, 2017).

Indeed, authenticity is considered paramount in this realm of cultural production, portrayed as the opposite of the highly curated images of the 'legacy' media celebrities (Jennings, 2020). The appeal of content creators' work is powerful among younger demographics, with 54% of Gen Z and Millennials expressing interest in becoming content creators (Morning Consult, 2019). This emphasis on authenticity is especially pronounced in the field of lifestyle content creation, encompassing beauty, fashion, and everyday 'vlogging,' where content creators are portrayed with a "girl-next-door" charm, inviting audiences into their personal lives and intimate spheres (Abidin, 2018; Duffy, 2017, p. 99; Marchese, 2023). Therefore, this study focuses on lifestyle content creators as an 'extreme case' to examine cultural discourse's role in how individuals experience meaningfulness in work.

3.3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

This study employs qualitative methods to explore the grounded experiences of content creators (Barley & Kunda, 2001), as they are particularly suited to investigating emerging phenomena like content creation (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). Aligned with the justification perspective on meaningfulness in work (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017), this study employs in-depth interviews, which are complemented by online and in-person observations. In-depth interviews are valuable for accessing individuals' meaning-making and culture (Lamont & Swidler, 2014; Pugh, 2013). I conducted 51 in-depth interviews[8] with content creators and other participants in the field, such as marketers, agents who represent content creators, and industry experts, as those individuals can carry cultural discourses in the field. Participants were recruited through cold emails and snowball sampling, encompassing creators from major platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. In my recruiting, I aimed to capture a range of audience sizes and platform preferences among content creators (see Appendix A for a list of interviewees). These interviews, primarily conducted via video/audio calls with some in-person sessions, utilized semi-structured, open-ended questions to probe various dimensions of their work experiences. Interviews started with 'tour' questions that address content creators' understanding of their journey in the field of content creation, which would bring out their accounts of 'why they do what they do,' as well as the daily work practices, processes of content creation, emotional responses, and most importantly, what meaning they were making of them.

In addition to interviews, this study embraces methodological pluralism (e.g., Luker, 2009) by complementing interview data with netnography (Kozinets, 2010) and in-person observation of their work. Specifically, netnography of exchanges on social media platforms and discussion forums, the online 'community' in which content creators and their audience immerse themselves and situate their meaning-making. This triangulation enriched the contextual understanding of content creators' work, furthering the situated understanding of the interview data (see Massa & O'Mahony, 2021 (see Massa & O'Mahony, 2021 for an example of a similar triangulation effort).[9]

[8] These are the same set of interviews used for Chapter 2.

[9] Details of how netnography and in-person observations are conducted can be found in Chapter 2.

Data analysis followed an iterative, inductive approach, iteratively refining insights through constant engagement with theoretical frameworks and emerging empirical findings. During the pilot study phase, when I was lurking in the online spaces, including social media platforms and discussion forums, what emerged was the centrality of 'authenticity'—a critical virtue among content creators (and to their audience) and a primary source of meaningfulness, echoing the broader cultural discourse on meaningful work. Furthermore, in early interviews, the concept appeared to be presented as both the means and the end of content creators' work and success (Duffy, 2017). Open coding of my data from interviews initially revealed tensions between content creators' idealized perceptions of authenticity in their work and the practical realities of their work. Over time, it became clear that those contradictions are integral to content creators' experiences. The subsequent analysis focused on understanding how content creators navigate these tensions through various meaning-making practices in ways that reflect cultural discourses surrounding authenticity in work. Furthermore, these tensions were more prominent in the experiences of some content creators. Therefore, in the following section, I will unpack the concrete instantiation of the cultural discourse at the field level of content creation—which I label a myth. Additionally, I will present how content creators experience the misalignment between the promise presented in this myth and the reality of their work. Finally, I will explore how content creators engage in meaning-making in ways that allow them to navigate the misalignment, continuing to ground their experience of meaningfulness in the same myth and the cultural discourse it reflects.

3.4 Findings

3.4.1 The Myth of Authenticity and Success in the Creator Economy

In the creator economy, there is a widespread belief that authenticity is critical to success. The narrative is that authentic self-expression fosters authentic connections with the audience, whose attention, trust, and loyalty form the basis of 'influence' or 'clout' that content creators can capitalize on for income. Authenticity's connection to success is closely tied to the notion of 'niche,' explaining how unique self-expression draws like-minded others who appreciate the content. This unique point of offering in the market becomes the niche, connecting authentic self-expression to market success. As one content creator noted, this is how authenticity becomes

the “biggest asset” for content creators, making each individual's unique self-expression a significant and valued part of the creator economy.

> … the biggest thing that I tell anyone who is new to this or who wants to get started is that there is competition here. And so the **biggest asset that you have as a creator that no one else has is that you are you** and no one else has lived your experience. **No one else sees things the way you do**, and so you showing up with no fear of showing what you think, what you eat, what you do, the way you look at things, **all of that is really important to building trust with the community, to help them get to know you better**” (I#39)

Marketing industry professionals echo this narrative, describing how the value of working with content creators lies in their unique voices, enabling brands to tailor their marketing campaigns to the audience of each creator. This way, the content resonates better with the audience, the end-consumers of the brands, than having one advertisement for the campaign with one big traditional media star. A marketer from an influencer marketing agency explains how the key to influencer (i.e., content creator) marketing is authenticity, which enables the development of the community of audience around them:

> … to me, **what makes influencer marketing actually really work**, from its very early days, was the **authenticity**. … "Well, if a lot of what we talk about is that, **'community is built around an influencer...'**" Because, they're bringing content and **connection to an audience, around topics that those audiences really care about**; the ability to develop, really, these micro communities, or these hyper niche communities on social. (I#38)

Content creators heavily borrow from this narrative in meaning-making of how they were and will be able to become successful in their work. They express a strong belief that positive audience response and success can be attributed to their authenticity in self-expression reflected in their content, with which their audience connected. For instance, Interviewee 3 mentions how her initial success was linked to “connecting with your inner purpose, and then connecting that with your (her) inner niche,” following the advice of a social media growth coach. She started with what she “saw was popular at the time,” mimicking others’ product reviews and tutorial

content. Then, she shifted to her niche, which was content about using makeup products you already own rather than buying new products (i.e., “Project Pan,” meaning you hit the bottom pan of makeup products’ containers by using them up). This shift resonated well with her audience and led to her most popular videos. Similarly, other content creators emphasize that their audience connects with their true selves, as shown through their content (e.g., “you got to find the root of what you have to offer … what your passions are” (I#30), “it’s very important for creators to showcase their real life, style and personality in their posts” (I#29), “it’s all about our personalities” (I#17), “I offer no service but who I am” (I#7), “I am unique…for me and my channel, it’s me” (I#1)).

The appeal of content creators lies in the seamlessness of how authenticity in self-expression and connection can lead to success, to the point where the work “does not feel like work” (I#9)—simply by finding and being the authentic self, one can earn income and achieve success. Content creators often refer to their previous professional lives where they could not be authentic. For example, Interviewee 14, who complains about being forced to be a blank canvas in an acting school, states:

> So, it was fun for me to be able to do that **with YouTube where I'm like, "Oh, nobody can tell me that I have to be a certain way. I just get to be myself and people seem to like that."** So, that's very cool. It makes you want to be yourself even more when people say that they like what you're doing. (I#14)

Similarly, Interviewee 46 notes:

> I think the coolest thing about influencers … the people that are really into it, posting every day, vlog, all of that, **they're just paid to live their life and have fun. It doesn't mean that it's not work, but it's so free. No one can tell you no. No one can be like, "You're not doing this right." You're just getting to be your (self)**... and it's fun, and it's free, and it's really cool. (I#46)

The flip side of this narrative is that inauthenticity, or prioritizing market success over authenticity, is seen as detrimental to success, as the audience would not resonate with such creators. For example, Interviewee 43 explains:

> I think **being real is paramount.** … Paramount online. **No one wants to be in a relationship via online with someone who is just blank.** Does that make sense where it's just like, you don't have a feel for that energy, **you don't have a feel for their emotional self or a feel for how they actually exist.** (I#43)

Even in cases of initial success without authenticity, it is understood that this would not be sustainable long-term, as the audience would "catch" it (I#30) when "the mask … cracks," asking, "Were you ever authentic?" (I#7). Interviewee 30 reflects this sentiment.

> Yeah. I think someone starting out, people always tell you **go niche, find something that you're passionate about** … You find **something that you believe in** and you push that and you work towards that. **People are going to see that, they're going to resonate with it and then want to follow you** because of it and I think **if you started off with something that you're not and you're trying to push this sense of false reality on social, I think people catch on** nowadays more than ever. (I#30)

Interviewee 7 adds:

> I think a lot of YouTubers are more so focused on growth so **they kind of change themselves to fit whatever is growing at any given moment**. Again, going back to that's **unsustainable** ... **as a human being and then ultimately your income**. It doesn't make sense to me. It doesn't make sense to me. You're becoming a new person for someone else each year and **at some point the mask kind of cracks and people realize, were you ever authentic?** (I#7)

3.4.2 Cracks in the Myth: Frictions as Experienced by Content Creators in Their Work

However, the reality is such that there are many cracks in this myth, and the narrative of authenticity leading to success can even trap individuals in contradictions. In particular, content creators actively pursuing growth in their online presence often experience friction more prominently. Moreover, the longevity and growth of social media platforms can render these frictions more prominent, further exposing the cracks in the myth.

3.4.2.1 Friction Between Authenticity in Self-Expression and Market Success

Content creators experience friction in realizing the promise of authentic self-expression materializing into success. What is popular and what feels most authentic to themselves could be misaligned, resulting in content creators being torn between what they consider to be authentic self-expression and market success. Sometimes, even if the pursuit of market success means engaging in actions that are "the exact opposite of (being in) the creator zone" (I#4) or even "life-sucking" (I#34), content creators describe their decision to compromise what they initially wanted their content to be as a reflection of their authentic self-expression.

Content creators engage in a delicate balancing act, trying to find an overlap in the "Venn Diagram(s)" of what they would like to do and where they see positive responses (I#3). However, the struggles might lead to the conclusion that they must shift away from what they originally envisioned. For example, Interviewee 11 describes her process of deciding to stick with her lipstick swatch content, which involves trying out different colors of lipsticks as a reference for others to see as a type of makeup review content. While one of her first pieces of content to take off was a lipstick swatch, she tried to branch out since she did not "want to be known as the lipstick swatch girl." Unfortunately, despite her attempts to diversify based on her interests, her lipstick swatch content continued to do well as opposed to other types of content that were not yielding positive responses, so she decided to "embrace" and "lean into" the swatches as "it was the best option for me."

The pressure can be so intense that content creators morph their lives outside of social media to conform to the image they believe is being projected on their social media accounts, deciding not to buy clothes that do not match the image since they cannot take pictures in those clothes and post them on social media platforms (I#47). This friction between authenticity in self-expression and attaining success through external recognition can be particularly salient when content creators focus on growth to achieve financial independence from this work. For example, the general rule of thumb in the field is that reaching 100,000 subscribers/followers would lead to sufficient income to be a full-time content creator, a common goal among content creators. Focusing on growth intensifies the pressure for successful performance, meaning that when content creators experience the friction between being authentic and pursuing market success, the pressure is such that they consider compromising on their authentic self-expression.

Accounts from Interviewee 39 exemplify this friction and how she is "shifting a little bit away from fashion and beauty," which she regards as her passion, "at least for a little while." She realized that the best-performing type of content on her social media is content about the influencer industry and tips on how to grow as a content creator based on her experience. She recognizes that she "need(s) to give people a lot of what they want" and "do what works and grows."

> … I also recognize that in the current place that I'm in, where **I'm trying to grow and scale** ... **first, I need to give people a lot of what they want**, which right now is either tips for content creators or funny commentary on the influencer industry … **I basically came to that conclusion just looking at what videos were getting the most views, where I was getting followers on TikTok, where I was getting shared content there** … But then I think that right now, **I just want to do what works and grows, so that I can help more people and reach more people, and even if that means shifting a little bit away from fashion and beauty, at least for a little while.** (I#39)

This negates how authenticity should "naturally" lead to success (I#30), pointing to the cracks in the myth.

Furthermore, the longevity in this field, which correlates with growth, can also accentuate the friction between authentic self-expression and market success. This can occur due to the expectations of the audience about content creators' identity and, thus, their niche. As content creators, over time, feel that they have outgrown the specific niche they have built, they perceive the constraint from the audience's expectation to maintain the initially projected image. There is pressure to "stay in the box" (I#7) given comments such as "Oh, I'm unsubscribing, you've changed," or "…you're not the same person or you don't do the same content anymore," even though the content creator started when she was 19 and is now turning 27—a long time for a person not to change, according to the content creator (I#17). Interviewee 3 describes her fear that such a reaction might happen, which pushed her to stay in the realm of "cruelty-free beauty," a niche that she initially established, despite a change in her opinion about the category as she realized that the boundary for the category was arbitrary.

> For me, my thoughts on the cruelty-free beauty thing have evolved over time … **But I also know that a lot of people who started following me, followed me because of the**

> **cruelty-free angle. And I worry that if I completely change what I think about that, people are going to be upset … it's tricky,** evolving as a person, but also figuring out how to present that online when you have a lot of people watching you and critiquing you. … **I don't even know if I would still be strictly cruelty-free anymore if I didn't have a channel. But because I do, I've had to really factor in like what my audience thinks**, and feedback that I've gotten from them and almost incorporate that into my decision-making. (I#3)

3.4.2.2 Friction Between Authenticity in Connection and Market Success

Content creators experience friction in realizing the promise of authentic connection with others in their pursuit of success. Capitalizing on their 'influence' requires a balancing act since there is the threat of coming across as 'inauthentic,' yet it is an integral part of content creators' work. Their sources of income include (1) a share of platforms' advertising revenue (i.e. when platforms pay a portion of the revenue they earn from showing advertisements to the audience consuming those creators' content), (2) sponsored content (i.e., payment from brands that want their products to be featured in creators' content), (3) revenue from 'affiliate' links or codes (i.e., a share of sales that occur through the links that the content creators post), and (4) direct payment from the audience (e.g., subscription services, merchandise sales, donations). Therefore, all content creators' income sources are directly or indirectly related to the scale and depth of 'connection' that content creators can forge with their audience. It is their audience that brings eyeballs and engagement necessary to turn content creators into valuable resources for platforms and brands, as well as directly paying content creators.

Content creators proceed with caution, sensing this type of friction, when they upload sponsored content (I#1, I#9, I#12), review and recommend products they received for free in return for exposure (i.e., "PR" products (I#4, I#5, I#9, I#12, I#16), or decide where and how many commercials to place (I#1). Interviewee 9 describes her back-and-forth concerning whether she wants to post any sponsored content at all, fearing that her "audience is going to yell at me or they're not going to trust me," accusing her of "lying" about how good the products from sponsoring brands are. However, as she contemplated it, she realized that not doing sponsored videos does not "really pay the bills," leading her to change her mind. Interviewee 1 also muses about her process of optimizing advertisement placement in her YouTube videos, lest her audience become "annoyed" by the ads.

> … that's another huge strategy … is where to put the commercials in your videos. You're in charge of that, you can do it to where your videos only play commercials at the start and at the end, you can do it where you put them in, they call it mid roll … **I asked for feedback on Instagram like, "Do you to get annoyed with a certain amount of commercials?" Because you don't want people to be annoyed**… So there's a really **fine balance** that you have to find… (I#1)

Content creators, feeling this tension, describe the need for striking a delicate balance—"I wanted the money, but I also wanted to come across (as) genuine" (I#12)—as a "cutthroat" pressure (I#1).

Additionally, the friction between market success and being authentic in connecting with the audience can become prominent with the pursuit of growth as well as with growth. While being authentic vis-à-vis the audience is considered "paramount" (I#43), the requests from the audience for certain types of content, which content creators would otherwise value and eagerly respond to, can be deprioritized. This is because these requests from the audience can reflect their 'niche' preferences, at odds with the preferences of the broader set of the audience in the market that content creators are trying to embrace in order to grow—something that Interviewee 4 describes as a "can't see the forest from the trees … situation." It is also possible that content creators are facing the need to appeal to algorithms, as discussed in detail in the previous chapter, which could appear misaligned with the niche audience they have already accumulated. Interviewee 13 describes the dilemma she experiences when she perceives a discrepancy between what the wider audience wants, which gets reflected in algorithms, and what her commenting audience wants.

> So, **the algorithm definitely does come into play** with the types of videos that I do. And **people send me ideas all the time**, like, you should do this, you should do this, you should do this. And I'm like, **"I wish I could, but I know not that many people would watch it."** So, it (algorithm) definitely is kind of like high on my priority list. Just because, **when you put in so much work to a video you want people to actually see it. And definitely want to keep growing**. So yeah, **unfortunately**, it's something you have to think about. (I#13)

Furthermore, with growth, content creators face challenges in managing their initial level of connection to their more extensive audience. Several factors hinder content creators' authentic connection with their audience. First, the negative or “trolling” comments, which are cited as one of the worst parts of content creators” work (I#11, I#16, I#17, I#48), sometimes with severe consequences for their mental health (I#13, I#17, I#48, FN#16). With an increased audience size, content creators are much more likely to be exposed to negative comments, especially the ones coming from people who “just want to get you riled up” (I#11) and are “ridiculous” (I#15), “hate(ful)” (I#13), and “psychotic” (I#46). Second, content creators with larger audience sizes also encounter audience members who feel “entitled” (I#16, I#26) to them, to their privacy and personal lives, or to the content they wish to see. Content creators express being frustrated, as their audience seems to take “the humanity out of it”—“Demanding things from me as if I'm a robot who then does reviews and I don't have a personality and I don't have feelings,” as their audience think “Well, this person's getting paid. They're getting free product. I deserve things from them” (I#16). Third, it can simply be the sheer number of the audience demanding attention and time from content creators. While many describe responding to, or at least trying to respond to, every single comment or direct message (i.e., DMs) that they get (I#3, I#4, I#10, I#13, I#18, I#19, I#29, I#37), this becomes impossible after a certain amount of growth. Interviewee 26, for example, describes how she “used to really pride myself on being the kind of person who replied to every single comment,” but “that just became unsustainable.” In fact, now she has a social media manager who replies to most comments and DMs in her place—a practice she points out is highly common among content creators of "substantial followings," although people might not realize it.

For these reasons, growth pushes content creators away from the once intimate connection they used to feel towards their audience and look to foster among them. Interviewee 33 offers a good comparison of her attitude before and after she grew:

> **I used to be looking at every comment because I was like, "Oh my God, this is so exciting"** when I have like millions of comments on here. **And I used to take it personally too** … because sometimes they can be super rude. **But I now just... I don't really look at the comments.** (I#33)

Interviewee 48 shares a similar sentiment of dissociation from her audience post-growth:

> **I actually did (interacted with audience) a lot more because once I started doing it** … You kind of create this little community … but well, especially on YouTube because **I experience a really, really fast amount of growth**. And so now, **you go from having a very dedicated audience who you know and you recognize names always…. to all of a sudden, it's just being pushed out to all these people that you don't know.** And you're just being exposed to more people, which is going to bring **a lot more negativity**. So I found during that time when I grew a lot, that **I was really pulling back … I want to walk away** because you just never know what you're going to see. And it just ruins your whole day. (I#48)

3.4.3 Justifications, Boundary Work, and Maintenance of the Myth

Despite apparent cracks in the myth and the experiences of friction in content creators' work, the myth of authenticity—how one can be successful based on authentic self-expression and connection—persists as content creators engage in meaning-making around it. To reject the myth, content creators would be implying (1) that their work practices involve what is labeled 'inauthentic' or (2) that their work is no longer as ideal as they have believed, with the seamless alignment between authenticity and success. Instead of rejecting the myth, despite apparent frictions, content creators respond to these frictions by engaging in justifications and boundary work, which helps them maintain their idea of their work practices as authentic, as well as the conception that their work is still meaningful.

3.4.3.1 Response to the Friction Between Authenticity in Self-Expression and Market Success

In response to the friction against authentic self-expression, content creators emphasize their motivation to serve their audience with their content, shifting the framing of their motivation to that of authentic connection. Whether reconsidering their channel's focus for market success or censoring what they say about specific brands and products they review, which could hurt their market performance, content creators offer justifications that their prioritization of market success still aligns with the ideal of authenticity. Instead of admitting to their actions violating the ideal of authenticity in self-expression, they offer justifications that their actions, in fact, are in line with the ideal of authenticity vis-à-vis their connection to the audience and the desire to be of service to them. For example, Interviewee 11 describes how she embraced the identity of "the lipstick swatch girl," which she initially perceived as

misrepresenting what she wanted to be on social media, justifying her decision to "embrace" the identity by stating, "This is what people want to see. This is what people find the most interesting and helpful." Similarly, Interviewee 39 contrasts her earlier approach of "just writing selfishly" with her current approach of "writing in service of your community," which she adopted for success.

In addition, content creators redefine authenticity in self-expression—expressing themselves honestly and transparently—as trying to be helpful and genuine in their connection to the audience, especially when they refrain from expressing negative views about brands and products. Negative views can harm content creators' market success by alienating some audience members who disagree with them and jeopardizing relationships with sponsoring brands. Therefore, content creators describe their effort to steer away from "raw" expressions of negative views, opting for more descriptive reviews in case of negative impressions, as opposed to being openly passionate in case of positive impressions (I#4, I#12, I#16, I#19). These practices, which would be considered inauthentic according to the initial definition of authenticity, are justified as being helpful to the audience (e.g., so that their audience is "able to digest it a little bit better," I#12) and therefore authentic. Interviewee 4 explains:

> I think it's funny, because I think **an initial definition you would think immediately what authenticity is, oh, just an honest review, right? … But I actually think it's a little more than just an honest review.** So, say, let's see, I could try a lipstick and hate it, right? So I could get on my channel and say … **It's the worst thing I've ever tried, and to perceive that as a very authentic statement. But I think it will be a lot more helpful if rather than saying that I said, okay, so I personally do not like this and here's why…**. it's actually far more **helpful** because people, they can watch that and say, okay, well, the things she doesn't like about this actually appeal to me.

She continues, about authenticity:

> … there comes a point where you as a content creator do figure that out (that people might disagree with you). And it's funny because **this is also where some people say authenticity drops off**, but that's because they're not defining it the way that I think it should be described. **People say, "Oh well, they never hate products anymore.**

> **They're not being honest in reviews." But hating products isn't actually helpful.** It's more helpful to describe….

A reversal of the means-end relationship implicit in the myth of authenticity leading to success occurs in these justificatory accounts. Market success becomes the means to serve a broader audience, facilitated by the seamless alignment between authenticity and success. This is how it is framed as a means to serve their audience even when they outright state that their end goal is to achieve market success and be "a household name" (I#12). Interviewee 12 exemplifies this:

> My end, I legit, **if I'm being like totally honest with you, I literally want to be a household name**. That is my dream, but not just to be like, I just want to be famous, just be famous. I know **my purpose in being sent to this earth is to truly help and encourage and uplift people … So I want to grow as large as I can grow**. If you ask me how large I want to grow, I want to be in the millions. (I#12)

As a result, content creators are able to maintain their self-perception of authenticity and avoid rejecting the myth.

3.4.3.2 Response to the Friction Between Authenticity in Connection to Audience and Market Success

In response to the friction against authentic connection, content creators engage in boundary work; they juxtapose their relative authenticity to the flagrant inauthenticity of the 'bigger' content creators in capitalizing on their influence over the audience. Portraying the egregiously inauthentic and exploitative behaviors of the 'bigger' content creators, content creators explain that they would never cross certain lines like the 'bigger' content creators. Content creators, especially when talking about their approach to content that is sponsored by brands or features free PR products that they received, which potentially evoke inauthenticity, blame the 'bigger' content creators for having tainted the reputation of content creators by "lying" (I#9), "selling out," and being "shill(s)" (I#7, I#30). Interviewee 20 criticizes a high-profile influencer promoting Diet Coke despite advocating "a caffeine-free and chemical-free lifestyle," saying:

> Like we just saw one the other week, there was a campaign for Diet Coke. … they happened to hire **a very high-profile influencer** who, amongst other things, talks about how she keeps a caffeine-free and chemical-free lifestyle. … **yet miraculously on her Insta feed and other feeds starts popping up these stories about how she starts every morning with a Diet Coke**, and you can only imagine the reaction from her followers, going, **"Wait a second, you're a paid shill." You've not only lost all your credibility, because clearly you sold out** … I think that that profoundly impacts the industry. (I#20)

Some content creators describe their own experiences of losing trust in 'bigger' content creators they once believed in, "turned off by their inauthenticity" (I#19). Interviewee 13 states:

> So, there are **a few bigger influencers who kind of push the same brand. And so, they will keep pushing it, and I would keep buying the products**. Because I'm like, "Oh, they're telling me that they're good." And it was only after, like probably a few years … **I started to question the influencers intentions**… And it turns out, **they were all making money from this brand.** … **So, I've definitely lost trust with some bigger influencers, because I think they do put money and being friends with the brand owners ahead of their subscribers**. (I#13)

What is intriguing about this boundary work is that content creators can always differentiate themselves from 'even bigger' creators, regardless of their growth. Interviewee 5 (~100K subscribers) criticizes "super, super popular influencers" whom she "stopped watching" because their sponsored content is not authentic. Interviewee 48 (~1M subscribers) identifies with "true artists" rather than "the most popular ones" that most people see online who only care about their appearances. High-profile examples such as Jaclyn Hill that Interviewee 14 mentions, who lost trust after launching low-quality, unhygienic cosmetics, serve to highlight these distinctions (W-V#12). 'Bigger' content creators are also portrayed as detached from their work, supported by marketing teams, outsourcing content production processes (e.g., editing), and operating like a "full-blown industry" (I#19) with "big productions" (I#1, I#4, I#9, I#5, I#14).

Content creators emphasize their relative authenticity by delineating lines they will not cross, such as promoting unsafe products or brands that they do not really like (I#5), offering dishonest opinions about brands/products to "kiss a brand's ass" (I#16, I#19), being out of touch with audience's reality (e.g., promoting $78 mascara, I#1), or taking down content with negative

opinions when offered money from brands (I#10). Interviewee 9, who was complaining about how she initially felt she should not be doing sponsored content "because so many larger influencers they had gotten sponsorships and lied," driving audience suspicion over sponsored content, explains how her approach is different:

> So for me, I would just give my two cents, honestly. **I tell everybody that no matter if I'm being paid or not, I'm going to give you my honest opinion.** And there have been a lot of times where … they **(brands) literally tell me, "Can you take down your video because we don't like how honest you are." … I don't care if you're paying me like a thousand dollars**, I don't care if you're paying me like $20, I'm going to give my audience what they deserve and they're not here to essentially hear some bullshit. ... And I just think that **if you're not really there to give your honest opinion, then I don't think that you should be a content creator at all**. (I#9)

Similarly, Interviewee 10 recalls pointing out a "racially charged" product name as inappropriate, leading the brand to ask her to remove the content. She also mentions being removed from a high-end brand's PR list after describing their expensive sunscreen as having a similar formula to a much cheaper product. She explains that she is unlike the 'bigger' content creators "with 200,000 YouTube subscribers" who "would value brand relationships a little bit more."

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the lines that content creators will not cross are often arbitrary (e.g., being willing to promote a low-quality foundation for money but not hotels because where one spends vacations is a more meaningful decision, I#52) or a very low bar (e.g., not promoting weight-loss tea with laxatives that upsets your stomach, I#7, or other "scammy" brands, I#9, I#19). As another example, Interviewee 12 describes how she might be willing to say exaggerated things about products (e.g., "my skin looks radiant") in commercials for brands which does not hold "as much weight" as posting such content on one's social media accounts. She also continues, describing an occasion where her integrity was put to the test:

> I remember one time, **it was something that I kind of felt indifferent about. So the brand was like, well, we'll pay you** (to feature the product in her content). So I was like, **I'm going to throw a ridiculous number out there, and if they get [buy it], I will**

> **review it**. And of course they didn't buy it. I was like, sorry, this is my budget. … So I ended up never talking about it. (I#12)

Although the lines can appear arbitrary, the boundary work establishes content creators as authentic in their connection to the audience against the temptation to prioritize market success, especially when authenticity can be questioned with commercial activities. The inauthenticity of 'bigger' content creators, who succumb to such temptation, is conjured to dispel the potential suspicion regarding their own inauthenticity. In addition to preserving content creators' sense of authenticity, these accounts maintain the myth of authenticity 'eventually' leading to success. Interviewee 7 says, "Money comes and goes, but when people know you as a person, that will shill anything that's not good for me as a business and just me as a person." Thus, the myth of authenticity leading to success in the creator economy avoids being rejected despite the cracks.

3.5 Discussion

This study explores the role of cultural discourse in workers' experience of meaningfulness in their work, focusing on content creators as a type of platform worker who draw on broader cultural discourses regarding the ideals of work and workers. The findings identify a field-level myth connecting authenticity to success, serving as a framework for how content creators find their work meaningful—through authentic self-expression and connection with others. This myth suggests that authenticity not only makes their work meaningful but also brings success. However, frictions arise between these idealized expectations and the reality of everyday work, particularly for content creators striving for growth or having achieved significant growth. Despite these frictions, content creators engage in practices of justificatory account-giving and boundary-setting that help them smooth out the conflicts, allowing them to maintain their source of meaningfulness and uphold the myth. Based on these findings, this study contributes to our understanding of meaningfulness in work, platform-mediated work, and the emphasis on authenticity at work. In this section, I discuss the implications and limitations of the current study.

3.5.1 Implications on Our Understanding of Workers' Experience of Meaningfulness

The findings of this study highlight the significant role of cultural discourse in workers' meaning-making and experience of meaningfulness, complementing existing literature that often emphasizes individual-level psychological perspectives (Rosso et al., 2010). While some studies acknowledge the contextual and socially constructed nature of meaning-making (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017), they often focus on immediate organizational contexts such as goals (Podolny et al., 2004), leader interactions (Carton, 2018; Grant, 2007), co-worker interactions (Pratt, 2000; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003), and formal practices (Beer et al., 2022). In the new landscape of work, where traditional organizational dynamics no longer apply (Cropanzano et al., 2023), understanding the role of cultural discourses becomes even more pertinent. This study demonstrates that cultural discourse about ideal work(ers) plays a powerful role in how individuals experience meaningfulness in work, as suggested by sociological perspectives (e.g., Lamont, 1992, 2009).

Content creators draw on the cultural discourse valuing authentic self-expression, constructing a myth that authenticity leads to success and meaningful work. Despite facing friction between the pursuit of authenticity and success, content creators use justificatory accounts and boundary work to portray their work as supporting the cultural discourse on authenticity at work. These findings support the justification perspective in the meaningfulness literature (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017), showing how individuals can experience meaningfulness in unlikely work contexts, with the added role of cultural discourses that idealize and moralize specific work (e.g., Cameron et al., 2022; Florian et al., 2019). In this case, the cultural discourse idealizes work that enables authenticity, which platform firms actively capitalize on and individuals respond to positively (Rosenblat, 2018; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). This study raises questions about the social processes by which cultural discourses are disseminated and internalized by content creators, such as through consuming online content from other content creators and those leading to the emergence of the field-level myth reflecting this cultural discourse. Although this study does not address these social processes, future studies could address them.

Furthermore, three additional aspects of the friction between the pursuit of authenticity and success are worth considering. First, these frictions are more prominent among content creators actively trying to grow their online presence, as well as content creators who have already undergone substantial growth. Although it is important to note that the data is not

longitudinal, preempting an investigation into the changes over time in content creators' experiences of these frictions suggests variance in how prominently these frictions are experienced. Second, content creators cling to the idealized ideas of their work and the myth of authenticity leading to success, using justificatory accounts and boundary work to sustain their self-view despite those frictions. This prevents them from rejecting the myth and contributes to reproducing the cultural discourse. Third, these frictions seem inevitable when cultural discourse idealizes authenticity in work and promises it as a seamless path to success. In fact, these ideals reflect time-old philosophical discussions on what work 'should' be (i.e., 'humanizing' work that transcends mere 'labor' that one must endure for survival) and how technological advancements might hinder or foster the realization of such ideals (Fayard, 2021). However, cultural discourses that idealize authenticity in work often paint an overly idealistic picture of work, leading to continuous friction for most workers exposed to market forces on platforms, even without traditional managerial control.

3.5.2 Implications on Our Understanding of Platform-Mediated Work

This study advances our understanding of platform-mediated work by illustrating how cultural discourses help platforms maintain control over individuals they do not formally employ, even amid contradictions. Platforms face the challenge of attracting, directing, and retaining workers as a 'shadow employer' (Friedman, 2014; Gandini, 2019). Existing research highlights how platforms use rhetoric portraying platform-mediated work as an escape from traditional organizational work, promising autonomy, flexibility, and self-expression for those who are too entrepreneurial, independent, and creative for corporate jobs (Rosenblat, 2018; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). In reality, platform-mediated work creates unique pressures through 'soft control' mechanisms such as quantified evaluations (i.e., metrics, ranking, ratings) and algorithms (Cameron, 2022; Rahman, 2021; Rosenblat, 2018; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). While existing studies demonstrate a variance in workers' responses to the gap between promise and reality, such as disillusionment or continued (dis)belief (e.g., Cameron, 2022; Cameron et al., 2022; Kost et al., 2018), they often do not directly address the meaning-making in relation how cultural discourses might persist through workers' meaning-making.

My findings reveal that workers may cling to a myth reflecting these cultural discourses despite contradictions, continuing to engage in the meaning-making of their work in line with the myth and cultural discourses. This myth provides a basis for workers' experiences of meaningfulness, allowing them to maintain a self-perception of authenticity. Subsequently, workers' meaning-making may reproduce the myth and the associated cultural discourses, even when they face frictions that could invalidate the myth in their everyday work. While this study does not delve into the longitudinal dynamics that may unfold, future studies could investigate whether efforts such as justificatory account-giving and boundary work persist over time. Additionally, it is worth noting that content creators' work is quite distinct from some of the platform-mediated work that has received more attention in existing studies—namely ridehail drivers and delivery service providers (Schor et al., 2020). The creative nature and symbolic appeal of their work contrast with the work of gig workers, and especially ridehail drivers who typically perform predefined, manual tasks. Content creators, drawn to the symbolic appeal of authentic self-expression, may be more inclined to uphold cultural discourses idealizing such work compared to ride-hail drivers, whose work does not involve the same level of personal identity. This distinction underscores the diversity of platform-mediated work and echoes the call to consider different types of platform work (Schor et al., 2020; Vallas & Schor, 2020).

3.5.3 Implications on the Emphasis on Authenticity at Work

The findings of this study also have implications for the literature on authenticity at work and especially contribute to the growing caution against over-emphasizing authenticity. Initially, authenticity at work was encouraged as a factor that enhances experiences of meaningfulness (for review, see Rosso et al., 2010, pp. 108–109; Shamir, 1991). More recently, scholars have highlighted the potential "dark side" of authenticity, noting that demands for authenticity can lead to a sense of undesirable pressure and self-estrangement (Ibarra, 2015; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). This is particularly problematic when authenticity is rigidly defined and expected to be expressed in specific ways (e.g., 'having fun at work, Fleming & Sturdy, 2009), creating unrealistic expectations and a need to conform, which can ironically result in feelings of inauthenticity (Ibarra, 2015).

My findings show that a strong emphasis on authenticity at work can indeed be problematic, revealing how workers might respond by engaging in flexible meaning-making when torn between the pursuit of authenticity and success. In particular, frictions between authenticity and success are especially pronounced for content creators actively seeking growth or who have experienced substantial growth. Through justificatory account-giving and boundary work, content creators attempt to defend their self-perception of authenticity when the unrealistic promises for seamless success based on untainted authenticity do not materialize. This suggests that when there is such a strong emphasis and idealization of authenticity at work, admitting to one's 'inauthenticity' might risk jeopardizing one's positive sense of self. This could prevent them from rejecting the myth of authenticity, leading to success and the cultural discourse that upholds the ideal of work as authentic self-expression. This creates a double-bind situation where content creators must either admit that their work and selves do not conform to the ideal of work(ers) or continue to experience and navigate the frictions between the ideal and reality in their work.

3.6 Conclusion

In summary, this study examines the role that cultural discourses play in workers' experiences of meaningfulness in work in the context of social media content creators. It identifies a field-level 'myth' that upholds cultural discourses on the ideal of work as authentic self-expression, connecting authentic self-expression with audience connection and success. Despite tensions between authenticity and external demands from the audience and the market that reveal the cracks in the 'myth,' creators engage in justificatory account-giving and boundary work. These responses maintain their self-perception of authenticity and meaningfulness in work based on authenticity. Contributing to the literature on meaningful work, this study underscores cultural discourses as an essential factor in workers' experiences of meaningfulness. The findings also further our understanding of platform-mediated work, as well as how individuals navigate a strong emphasis on authenticity in work amidst practical challenges and contradictions.

Chapter 4
Conclusion

Technological advancements have always generated both optimism and concern about their impacts on work (Zuboff, 1988). Platforms, as a novel technological development, have been at the center of recent transformations in how work is organized (Vallas & Schor, 2020). These platforms, which often use machine-leaning algorithms, have sparked debates about their effects on work and workers. On the one hand, optimistic views suggest that platforms create new opportunities for individuals seeking flexible work arrangements as 'micro-entrepreneurs' (e.g., Sundararajan, 2017). On the other hand, there are concerns about job precariousness and the loss of control over work conditions, especially with warnings against algorithmic control (e.g., Rahman, 2021; Ravenelle, 2019; Wood et al., 2019). Scholars are now striving for realistic assessments of the nuanced effects platforms have on the landscape of work, identifying which aspects are genuinely advantageous and which pose risks for workers (e.g., Cameron, 2022; Schor et al., 2020). This pattern of panic, near-utopian visions, and subsequent realistic assessments is a common reaction to new technologies and the transformations they bring to work.[10]

What is particularly intriguing about these perspectives is how new technologies and the 'crises' they inevitably evoke (re)ignite long-standing debates about the nature of work and its relationship to human dignity (Fayard, 2021). The underlying assumption often suggests that work should be a means of self-expression and fulfillment rather than merely a means of meeting basic economic necessities. Work, therefore, is considered fundamental for achieving human dignity (Hughes, 1958). This raises the question: If this is what work should be, what types of work in the real world approximate this ideal? With each significant technological advancement,

[10] The Industrial Revolution, for instance, elicited similar reactions. Marx (1978) cautioned against the dangers of the capitalist mode of production enabled by new technologies, resulting in the emergence of the proletariat class and their alienation at work. At the same time, he acknowledged that new technologies could contribute to individuals' freedom under a different social system, allowing people to pursue fulfilling work without being tied to specific occupations or the pressure of meeting basic needs.

the predominant ways of organizing work and the cultural archetypes of work evolve, redefining what constitutes ideal work.

Today's cultural discourses about ideal work emphasize authentic self-expression and portray the ideal worker as an entrepreneurial, creative, and independent subject unafraid of taking risks (e.g., Neff, 2012). Platforms, which mediate work using new technologies, rely on and reproduce these cultural discourses to attract workers who find appeal in them (Rosenblat, 2018; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). My dissertation examines individuals, at the frontier of platform-mediated work, who embrace these cultural discourses and the ideal of work promoted by these discourses: social media content creators. As cultural producers on platforms, these individuals believe that their work is a form of authentic self-expression (Duffy, 2017). However, their reality does not align with the ideals. In fact, this very belief that their work is a form of authentic self-expression can introduce additional challenges, as I explore in the two empirical chapters of this dissertation.

Chapter 2 investigates how this belief complicates content creators' response to algorithmic opacity, a particular challenge in platform-mediated work. Algorithms, especially machine-learning algorithms deployed in today's platforms, enable platform-mediated work by automating data processing. Nevertheless, their ability to process fine-grained data at scale and their ability to update in real-time makes them 'opaque,' rendering their inner workings indecipherable to workers. This opacity frustrates content creators, whose self-worth is linked to the metric performance of their content mediated by these algorithms. In response, content creators engage in flexible meaning-making of algorithms, constructing 'imaginaries' of how algorithms operate. Portraying algorithms as biased and/or inconsistent helps them deflect blame to algorithms for poor performance, protecting their self-worth. The opacity of algorithms partly enables this flexible meaning-making, as these imaginaries cannot be disproven. Therefore, while the belief in authentic self-expression intensifies the challenges posed by algorithmic opacity, it also prompts responses that mitigate these challenges.

Chapter 3 delves into content creators' experiences of meaningful work based on their belief that their work aligns with the ideal of authentic self-expression at work in prevalent cultural discourses. A field-level myth reflecting those cultural discourses portrays content creation as ideal work—work that not only allows for authentic self-expression but also enables success based on authenticity. Undoubtedly, this myth creates unrealistic expectations, leading to

friction between the pursuit of authenticity and market success. In particular, such friction seems to be prominent among content creators aiming to grow their online presence, as well as those who have undergone substantial growth. Instead of rejecting the myth, however, content creators engage in justificatory account-giving and boundary work to maintain the self-perception of authenticity, preserving their work's meaningfulness despite contradictions. This chapter highlights the role of cultural discourses in how workers experience meaningfulness and how they maintain these ideals amidst challenges.

Many questions still remain at the intersection of technological advancements, new ways of organizing work, and evolving cultural ideals of work. This dissertation underscores the significance of meaning(-making) and culture in workers' responses to the challenges that they encounter in the new landscape of work. Meaning-making deeply influences individual experiences and can have broader societal implications through cultural ideals that persist, as illustrated in Chapter 3. For future research, it is also essential to explore how these dynamics manifest across different social categories, such as gender, class, and race/ethnicity. For example, lifestyle content creation is a gendered field dominated by gendered norms of self-presentation, interactions, and, most importantly, consumption. Future research should investigate how different elements of the future of work interact with those social categories in unexpected ways, impacting individuals' experiences, work, and society.

This dissertation, while part of the earlier efforts to comprehend the effects of the latest technological advancements, aligns with the longstanding contemplation of what work ‘should’ and ‘can’ be with new technologies. Continuing this line of research, particularly through grounded inquiry into work when existing assumptions no longer hold, can enhance our understanding of work, technology, and the pursuit of human fulfillment and dignity.

Appendix

Table A.1 List of Interview Participants

Table A.1 List of Interview participants. 'Main platform' indicates the primary platform on which they operate, even if they operate across multiple platforms.

Interview #[11]	**Role**	**Main platform**	**YouTube subscribers**	**Instagram followers**	**TikTok followers**
1	Content creator	YouTube	3.66K	5450	4
3	Content creator	YouTube	12.5K		
4	Content creator	YouTube	23.5K	3898	
5	Content creator	YouTube	84.7K	52.3K	
7	Content creator	YouTube	612K	110K	92.7K
9	Content creator	YouTube	55.1K	6447	67.1K
10	Content creator	TikTok	6.73K	40.2K	168K
11	Content creator	YouTube	16.3K	1555	50
12	Content creator	YouTube	12K	10.2K	
13	Content creator	YouTube	2.52K	1100	112
14	Content creator	YouTube	2.7K	15.8K	
15	Content creator	YouTube	1.2M	52.1K	
16	Content creator	YouTube	9.12K	6495	229
17	Content creator	YouTube	1.63M	208K	129.1K
18	Content creator	YouTube	12.6K	3376	
19	Content creator	YouTube	5.05K	1123	
20	Influencer database company (CEO)				
21	Influencer marketing agency (Consultant)				

[11] Inconsistencies in numbering because some interviews had to be dropped from the sample due to interviewees' locations (outside the US)

Interview #[11]	Role	Main platform	YouTube subscribers	Instagram followers	TikTok followers
22	Influencer marketing agency (CEO)				
23	Influencer marketing agency (Director)				
24	Industry expert				
25	PR agency (Data Scientist)				
26	Content creator	Instagram	68.8K	126K	
27	Influencer database company (Senior Director, Client Development)				
28	Influencer marketing agency (Director, Client Success)				
29	Content creator	Instagram		29.2K	
30	Content creator	TikTok	21.5K	228K	376.2K
31	Influencer database company (Associate Director)				
32	Content creator	Instagram		23.7K	
33	Content creator	TikTok		56.9K	74.9K
34	Content creator	TikTok	72	11.9K	77.5K
35	Content creator[12]	Instagram		23.7K	
36	Industry expert (Growth hacker)				
37	Content creator	Instagram		22.9K	155
38	Influencer database company (Executive Director, Client Development and Strategy)				
39	Content creator	Instagram		12.5K	
40	Content creator	Instagram		9597	

[12] The same interviewee as interview #32.

Interview #[11]	**Role**	**Main platform**	**YouTube subscribers**	**Instagram followers**	**TikTok followers**
41	Platform Employee (Researcher)				
42	Industry expert				
43	Content creator	Instagram		34.5K	463
44	Industry expert				
45	Industry expert				
46	Content creator	Instagram		105K	
47	Content creator	Instagram		37.3K	
48	Content creator	YouTube	986K	302K	
49	Industry expert				
50	Brand-end social media marketer				
51	Content creator	Instagram	340	3K	1K
52	Content creator	Instagram		70.6K	
53	Industry expert				
54	Content creator	TikTok		6.7K	48.6K

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