

Original Article

Lived Experiences of Social Media Content Creators: A Phenomenography

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Abstract

This paper examined the lived experiences and coping mechanisms, as well as the professional reflections of online content creators, using a qualitative research design grounded in a phenomenographic approach. Fifteen content creators were interviewed in depth to explore differences in experiences and perceptions of content creation as an online practice. Thematic analysis was used to identify specific categories of description and patterns of variation. Results indicated that content production experiences are goal-oriented endeavors, and themes were revealed, such as purpose-driven, opportunities and outcomes, Challenges and pressures, and negative feedback and public scrutiny. Further, creators responded with a combination of coping strategies, including emotional disengagement, strategic planning, flexibility in response to platform changes, reliance on technology, social support, faith-based coping, and persistence. In addition, participants' insights include emphasizing the importance of authenticity, ethical responsibility, and audience-centered content, as well as their role as influencers who need to be accurate and influential. Creation of content was also explained as a transformative process, which formed identity, purpose and life direction.

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary digital landscape, content creation has emerged as a dynamic and influential component. At the same time, digital technologies have brought new challenges, including algorithm-driven visibility, the spread of misinformation, cyberbullying, and the relentless pressure to constantly innovate (Sahu & Sahu, 2022; Duffy et al., 2020). Platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram have provided unparalleled opportunities to share information, entertainment, and personal narratives with global audiences. This transformation has revolutionized media production, distribution, and consumption, presenting both empowering opportunities and intricate challenges. In these challenges, the importance of media literacy becomes increasingly pressing, yet it is inconsistently applied. Gennaro and Kellner (2023) emphasize the significance of critical media literacy for both creators and consumers in resisting information manipulation and corporate platform influence. Media literacy is the critical ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in various forms, enabling both content creators and audiences to engage ethically and thoughtfully with digital content.

For creators, media literacy demands grappling with ethical dilemmas, the risks of misinformation, and the pressures exerted by dominant platforms. For audiences, insufficient literacy heightens the risk of mistaking influence for expertise, blurring the line between credibility and popularity. This tension highlights the challenges faced by both creators and audiences in navigating a digital landscape where journalistic credibility is compromised and the rapid pace of circulation often overshadows the importance of verification (Gennaro & Kellner, 2023). In today's media-saturated world, the research addresses a critical gap by focusing on qualitative studies on content creators in Mindanao, especially in the Province of Cotabato.

By doing so, the study aims to enhance our understanding of how creators in regions beyond the country's capital manage the challenges of the digital economy. This approach ensures that discussions about the creator economy include perspectives beyond global influencers and metropolitan contexts, providing original insights into digital labor, media literacy, and participatory culture in the Philippine periphery. Content creators are distinct from casual users because they intentionally curate, edit, and strategize their output to maintain visibility and relevance within algorithmically mediated environments. Their lived experiences shed light on the delicate and uncertain realities of digital labor in today's media landscape. Unlike traditional journalism, where professional standards and institutional checks once offered stability, digital labor on social media platforms demands relentless productivity without any guarantees of security or recognition. As Fuchs (2024) elucidates, digital labor is defined by its unpredictability, invisibility, and the exploitation of affective work (Fuchs, 2024). It is defined as the commodified, often precarious, work performed on digital platforms where user activity generates economic and cultural value, frequently under conditions of invisibility and without traditional labor protections (Fuchs, 2024).

Digital platform refers to the online infrastructure that mediates, regulates, and monetizes user participation, shaping visibility and engagement through algorithmic governance. Media culture is defined as the symbolic environment created by media texts and practices, reflecting and reproducing cultural norms, values, and identities within a digital ecosystem (McLuhan, 1964; Meyrowitz, 1986). A significant portion of this work is not governed by journalistic rigor but rather by the opaque algorithms of digital platforms. These systems dictate visibility and monetization, forcing creators to adapt their practices to prioritize engagement metrics over accuracy, credibility, and social value. Consequently, what audiences perceive as authentic self-expression often involves precarious work, exposing creators to economic and emotional vulnerabilities (Duffy et al., 2020). This study is anchored on the Media Ecology theory of McLuhan (1964) which posits that media and technology are not merely channels for communication, but rather environments that shape human perception, behavior, and culture (McLuhan, 1964; Postman, 2011). The digital space, specifically Facebook for this study, is treated as a structuring force that determines how content creators communicate, perform, and negotiate identity within their communities. It serves as a media environment that has evolved into an ecosystem that shapes perception, behavior, and social relations.

In the context of content creation, Media Ecology explains how algorithms, platform architectures, and technological affordances directly influence not only creators' visibility but also the ideologies and communities they help shape (Meyrowitz, 1986). Complementing this framework is Jenkins's Participatory Culture Theory, which explains how digital platforms foster interaction, collaboration, and co-creation between audiences and creators. Participatory culture demonstrates that content creation is no longer a one-way process but a collaborative negotiation between creators and their communities, in which audiences remix, comment on, and redistribute content (Jenkins et al., 2015). Participatory culture on digital platforms creates environments with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing content, and informal mentorship in which experienced participants guide novices.

Despite growing scholarship on influencer culture and digital creativity, a systematic exploration of content creators' lived, classifying experiences in crafting social-media posts remains absent. Existing research (Kietzmann et al., 2011; Goh et al., 2017) documents audience dynamics and monetization models, yet none capture the qualitative, outcome-oriented variations in creators' conceptualizations of content—an inquiry central to phenomenography. This study therefore fills a critical research gap by revealing the conceptual structures underlying creators' production strategies and emotional labor, as well as the implications for platform design, creator well-being, and industry policy.

Moreover, the research centers on lived experiences and acknowledges content creators' agency in shaping their narratives. This approach contrasts with the tendency to reduce creators to mere data points in digital marketing or platform analytics. By foregrounding their voices, the study aligns with Creswell's (1998) assertion that

qualitative inquiry should prioritize authentic perspectives and context-rich accounts. This approach not only enriches the understanding of content creation as a cultural and economic practice but also humanizes the study of digital labor by revealing the essence of creators' lived experiences. Specifically, the study seeks to explore the lived experiences of content creators, examine how they cope with the challenges they encounter, and identify the insights they can share about their chosen profession.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenographic research design to examine the different ways Facebook content creators experienced and understood content creation within the digital environment. Phenomenography is concerned with identifying variations in how individuals perceive, understand, and make sense of a particular phenomenon and representing these variations through categories of description (Marton & Booth, 1997). The approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand the qualitatively distinct ways content creators experienced the challenges, responsibilities, strategies, and realities of maintaining an active presence on digital platforms. Rather than determining a single common experience, the inquiry focused on the range of meanings and understandings expressed by participants regarding digital content creation.

The participants were 15 Facebook content creators who were included in the Mindanao Real Stories June 2025 Top 50 list, each with at least 100,000 followers. Purposive sampling was employed to select information-rich participants who had substantial and sustained experience in digital content creation. To qualify, participants were required to maintain an active online presence, have at least 1 year of consistent content-creation experience, and demonstrate the ability to articulate their experiences during an in-depth interview. Individuals who posted only occasionally or had fewer than 100,000 followers were excluded. The selected sample was considered appropriate for an intensive qualitative inquiry because it enabled detailed engagement with participants while maintaining a relatively homogeneous group with respect to their involvement in Facebook content creation (Creswell, 1998; Marton & Booth, 1997). The study focused exclusively on content creators and did not include followers, advertisers, or platform administrators.

Data were gathered using a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide aligned with the research questions and the study's phenomenographic orientation. The instrument contained open-ended questions intended to encourage participants to provide detailed accounts of their experiences rather than brief factual responses. Questions explored their experiences as content creators, including challenges encountered on digital platforms, strategies used to sustain content creation, and their perceptions of their roles and responsibilities. Follow-up probes addressed relevant issues, such as platform algorithms, cyberbullying, monetization, audience engagement, and internet connectivity, as they emerged during the interviews. The

guide was subjected to expert validation by internal validators from the research panel and external experts in qualitative research and media studies to assess its relevance, clarity, and alignment with the study's objectives. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented by field notes to document contextual and nonverbal information.

Prior to data collection, permission to conduct the study and ethical clearance from the University of Mindanao Ethics Review Committee were secured. Eligible participants received an information sheet explaining the purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and the voluntary nature of participation. Written informed consent was obtained before the interviews were conducted. Interviews were scheduled based on participants' availability and conducted either face-to-face or via online platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The researcher used the interview guide flexibly, allowing participants sufficient opportunity to elaborate on experiences they considered important. Rapport was established to facilitate open discussion, while field notes were prepared to supplement the recorded conversations. Audio recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve the participants' accounts as accurately as possible.

The data were analyzed following the phenomenographic tradition of Marton and Booth (1997). Analysis began with repeated reading of the transcripts to develop familiarity with the data as a whole. Relevant excerpts pertaining to the phenomenon were then identified, compared, and examined for similarities and differences in the ways participants described and understood their experiences. Related expressions were grouped and progressively refined into categories of description representing qualitatively distinct ways of experiencing the phenomenon. The relationships among these categories were subsequently examined to develop an outcome space that represented the collective variation in participants' understandings. Throughout the analysis, attention was given to preserving the meanings expressed by participants while distinguishing their accounts from the researcher's interpretations. Member checking was also conducted to clarify relevant accounts and ensure that the interpretations remained consistent with participants' intended meanings.

The researcher served as the primary instrument in the collection and interpretation of data. Reflexive journaling and analytic memos were maintained throughout the research process to document methodological decisions, emerging interpretations, and possible researcher assumptions. An audit trail was likewise maintained to support the transparency and consistency of the analytical process. Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was supported through sustained engagement with the data, member checking, field notes, and comparison of interview accounts with contextual observations. Dependability was strengthened through systematic documentation of the research procedures and analytical decisions, while confirmability was supported by reflexive journaling, analytic memos, and peer debriefing (Shenton, 2004; Nowell et al., 2017). Transferability was addressed through sufficient description of the

participants, setting, and research context to enable readers to determine the relevance of the findings to similar settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical safeguards were observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty or adverse consequence. Pseudonyms or participant codes were used in transcripts and research reports to protect identities, and identifying information was treated confidentially. Audio recordings, transcripts, consent documents, and other research data were stored in password-protected electronic files accessible only to the authorized researcher. Consent was obtained before audio recording, and participants were informed of the procedures to protect their privacy and confidentiality. The study received approval from the University of Mindanao Ethics Review Committee and was issued Ethics Certificate No. 2026-017 prior to the conduct of data collection. All procedures were implemented in accordance with the institution's ethical requirements, particularly those concerning informed consent, voluntary participation, privacy and confidentiality, potential risks and benefits, and the protection of research participants.

3. Results

The data gathered from the participants were analyzed and organized into emerging themes reflecting their motivations, opportunities, challenges, and perceptions in content creation. Through thematic analysis, the study identified significant patterns that illustrate how content creators navigate their roles in the digital environment. The discussion further explains the meaning and implications of these themes in relation to existing literature and the research objectives. Overall, the findings provide deeper insight into the realities, struggles, and transformative experiences of individuals engaged in content creation.

3.1 Experiences of Content Creators

Through the participants' narratives and shared experiences, several themes emerged that reflect the realities of creating digital content in contemporary online platforms. The findings reveal that content creation is influenced by personal passion, advocacy, opportunities for growth, and the desire for self-expression, while also involving challenges such as pressure, criticism, and public scrutiny. These themes provide a deeper understanding of how content creators perceive and navigate their roles, responsibilities, and experiences within the digital environment. The findings reveal that the lived experiences of content creators are shaped by both meaningful motivations and challenging realities within the digital environment.

Theme 1: Purpose-Driven Content Creation

This theme suggests that content creators are primarily motivated by personal advocacy, passion, self-expression, and identity formation. Creating content is not merely a source of entertainment or income, but also a platform for sharing beliefs, experiences, and values with audiences. These are evident in the responses of the content creators, where they mentioned:

P1: “Ang akong paghimo og content nahimo na gyud nga usa ka advocacy—usa ka intervention dili lang para sa akong mga estudyante nga nag-struggle sa Mathematics, kondili para sab sa mga ginikanan nga nanginahanglan og giya sa tibuok kalibutan.” (Creating content has truly become an advocacy for me—an intervention not only for my students who struggle with Mathematics, but also for parents around the world who need guidance.)

P3: “My primary identity is that of a food security advocate and a proponent of rural development and good governance; social media is simply one of the many vehicles I utilize to pursue these missions.”

Theme 2: Opportunities and Positive Outcomes

This theme indicates that content creation offers various benefits, including personal growth, increased confidence, social connection, influence over audiences, and potential career or financial opportunities. These positive experiences reinforce creators’ motivation to continue producing content and engaging with their communities. The participants highlight the rewarding experiences, opportunities, financial benefits, recognition, and personal growth brought by content creation as they said:

P6: “Being a content creator opens many doors, bringing unexpected financial opportunities through monetization and the chance to build a massive network of new friends.”

P10: “Dahil sa content creation, nagkaroon ng ginhawa ang buhay namin.” (Because of content creation, our lives have become more comfortable.)

P7: “It began as a simple hobby, but it has since grown into a professional venture and a primary source of income.”

Theme 3: Challenges and Pressures in Content Creation

This theme highlights the demanding nature of being a content creator. Participants experience pressure to consistently produce engaging content, maintain audience interest, manage time effectively, and adapt to trends and platform

expectations. These responsibilities can lead to stress, exhaustion, and emotional strain. The participants shared that:

P6: "Being a content creator is a significant challenge because of the intense time management it requires and the mental toll it can take."

P8: "Dili sayon ang pagbalanse sa akong kinabuhi isip usa ka classroom teacher ug content creator." (It is not easy to balance my life as a classroom teacher and a content creator.)

P10: "Kapoy ipagsabay ang work kag vlogging." (It is exhausting to balance work and vlogging.)

Theme 4: Public Scrutiny and Negative Feedback

As a final theme, this demonstrates that creators are frequently exposed to criticism, judgment, and negative online interactions. Public visibility subjects them to harsh comments and unrealistic expectations, which may affect their emotional well-being and self-confidence. Despite these challenges, many creators continue to persevere, showing resilience and commitment to their purpose. Rather than representing a single negative experience, these conceptions illustrate the different ways creators made sense of criticism and audience reactions within Facebook's participatory culture. The first variation conceptualizes Facebook as a digital environment of constant public judgment, reflected in the core ideas about being flooded with comments, bashing, and questioning of life choices. The participants specifically shared that:

P12: "I was flooded with comments calling me a "ma-arte" teacher." (I was flooded with comments calling me an "overly fussy" teacher.)

P6: "The worst part about being a content creator is the loss of your privacy."

P8: "Minsan kini-question ako ng mga bashers bakit ko daw iniwan ang kampo." (Sometimes, bashers question me about why I leave the camp.)

3.2 Coping Mechanism of Content Creators

The participants shared various strategies they use to manage negative feedback, public scrutiny, time constraints, emotional stress, and technological limitations while maintaining their online presence. The findings reveal that content creators develop coping mechanisms such as ignoring bashers, maintaining a positive mindset, drawing motivation from supporters, strengthening personal purpose, investing in equipment and connectivity, and balancing their responsibilities effectively. These experiences demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of content creators as they navigate the demands of the digital environment while continuing to pursue their passion, advocacy, and personal goals.

Theme 1: Emotion-Focused Coping

This theme reflects how content creators cope with criticism, bashing, and negative comments by choosing emotional restraint, non-engagement, and positive reframing. The participants shared:

P5: "*Gipili nako nga dili lang sila tagdon o i-mind tungod kay nasayod ko kung kinsa ang akong tinuod nga target audience.*" (I choose not to pay attention to or mind them because I know who my true target audience is.)

P10: "*When dealing with trolls, the most effective coping strategy is total non-engagement.*"

P3: "*Ang akong mga bashers kay ginaampo ra nako.*" (I simply pray for my bashers.)

P8: "*I just don't pay attention to them. My goal is to promote Ilonggo dishes and unique content.*"

Theme 2: Problem-Focused Coping

In this theme, participants demonstrated deliberate planning to manage workload, maintain consistency, and reduce uncertainty in content production. The participants' proactive approach to addressing the demands and uncertainties of content creation, particularly through planning and organization, was a recurring theme, highlighting their efforts to engage in problem-focused coping. On the other hand, rather than responding to stressors emotionally alone, participants showed deliberate responses to solve problems, keep content up and running despite shifts in audience engagement and platform algorithm changes, and remain productive. Their answers show that being creative is not enough to create content; systematic planning and decision-making are also required. Scheduling and content organization strategies were one of the most obvious problem-focused coping strategies. Specifically, the participants shared:

P6: "*Nakaschedule akong posts para organize akong contents. Naga content banking pod ko og gina schedule lang nako ang pagpost aron panigurado makapost bisag naay trabaho.*" (I schedule my posts to keep my content organized. I also practice content banking and schedule my posts so I can still publish even when I have work.)

P3: "*I have a production team. When I notice a drop in engagement, my first strategy is to reconnect my audience with practical, high-value solutions.*"

P2: "*I have a monthly content plan prepared. We review the previous contents na may mataas na views as our baseline for strategic planning.*" (I have a monthly content plan prepared. We review previous content with high views as our baseline for strategic planning.)

Theme 3: Resource-Based Coping

This theme indicates that participants relied heavily on digital platforms, AI tools, editing software, and platform features to manage content-creation demands, reduce workload, and maintain productivity. Resource-based coping emerged as a major theme in content creators' experiences, highlighting how participants relied on technological tools, digital platforms, editing applications, and support systems to manage the demands of content production. Among the participants, a common trend was extensive use of digital editing applications and production tools. Creative people felt that video editing software is indispensable for their daily work. The user-friendly nature of the editing tools, especially the popular tool called CapCut, which was mentioned several times, was cited as a key factor. The participants pointed that:

P6: "CapCut is my "go-to tool" since it makes creating an excellent video so much easier."

P11: "PowerDirector is the one creative application I cannot live without... it is the engine behind my video production."

P13: "Speakers, microphones, condensers and audio mixers, as well as editing software, to improve the quality of content."

Theme 4: Meaning-Based Coping

Another key finding from the content creator experiences was the phenomenon of 'meaning-based coping,' which was identified as a way that participants cope emotionally and psychologically with the challenges they face in the context of online criticality, inconsistent engagement, platform systems, and the demand for online visibility. Some participants adapted to the challenges through a combination of technical approaches and strategies, but others found ways to cope by finding meaning in faith, purpose, resilience, and a long-term commitment to their tasks. This type of coping enabled them to see challenges as opportunities for growth, service, and perseverance rather than obstacles. The answers demonstrate how spirituality serves as a source of stability and emotional equilibrium for creators amid the uncertainty of the digital world. Participants could, through faith, learn to lower stress levels and develop a healthy attitude toward accepting conditions beyond their control. Specifically, participants draw on religious faith or spiritual beliefs to interpret challenges and sustain emotional stability as they shared:

P7: "So, I just let God fulfill His will sa akoang daily life as an ordinary individual and a content creator." (So, I just let God fulfill His will in my daily life as an ordinary individual and a content creator.)

P14: "Ginatugyan ra namo sa Ginoo ang tanan." (We entrust everything to God)

P12: "I just let God fulfill His will sa akoang daily life." (I just let God fulfill His will in my daily life.)

3.3. Insights of Content Creators About their Chosen Profession

In today's digital age, content creation has become a vibrant and dynamic field, influenced by platforms, engagement, and algorithmic visibility. The study examines the intricate professional terrain in which content creators must balance creativity with strategy, technology with tools, and the ever-changing platform landscape. Their efforts are not merely about entertainment or information dissemination, but about being emotionally attuned, consistent, and responsive to audience reactions and the scrutiny they face online, while performing digital labor. An understanding of their lived experiences can be used to gain insights into their way of making meaning of their profession, remain productive in the face of uncertainty, and develop coping mechanisms to manage the opportunities and challenges of working digitally.

Theme 1: Content Creation as Advocacy and Purpose

The findings reveal that many participants perceive content creation not merely as a source of income or entertainment but as a platform for advocacy, education, inspiration, and community engagement. Their responses demonstrate that content creation has evolved into a purpose-driven profession in which creators use digital platforms to influence, educate, and make meaningful contributions to society. This aligns with recent studies emphasizing that creators increasingly position themselves as community advocates and authentic digital communicators rather than passive entertainers. For some participants, content creation was understood primarily as a profession for advocacy, service, and personal purpose, which was qualitatively different for the participants in the study from a phenomenographic perspective. Participants did not simply use content to make money in the digital sphere; they built meaning in their work as educators, motivators, public servants, and community contributors. In the phenomenographic perspective, these conceptions are various ways of experiencing and understanding the same phenomenon, in this case, content creation. Participants shared that:

P5: "To be an effective advocate, one must operate with a clear 'North Star.'"

P9: "My role as a creator is deeply rooted in public service."

P12: "Responsibility ko na mag-promote ng healthy at sustainable lifestyle." (It is my responsibility to promote a healthy and sustainable lifestyle.)

Theme 2: Vitality of Ethical Responsibility and Accountability.

Using the lens of phenomenography, participants exhibited different ways of understanding ethical responsibility and accountability in content creation. While all acknowledged responsibility as central to their profession, they varied in how they interpreted ethical obligations some emphasizing truth verification, others audience protection, professionalism, or compliance with platform regulations. These differences reveal the multiple meanings participants attach to responsible digital practice. Some participants recognized a moral obligation to be truthful and accurate in information. They mentioned:

P12: "As a former newsman, the cardinal rule of my advocacy is absolute accuracy, ensuring that every piece of information or article shared has been thoroughly validated and double-checked."

P5: "One of my greatest responsibilities is the verification of information. Because followers often 'idolize' or deeply trust their favorite creators, they are highly susceptible to believing what we share."

Theme 3: Content Creators are seen as influencers

The results show that content creators are widely perceived as influencers due to their power to shape opinions, behaviors, and trends in digital communities. The participants acknowledged that they have access to viewers and can sway them to act or think in a specific manner, particularly followers who regularly consume their material. As creators are on the internet, they can become sources of information, inspiration, entertainment, and social awareness. Attendees highlighted the significance of influencers beyond just having a large following or popularity. Influences, however, are the capacity to shape individuals' thoughts, emotions and reactions to particular problems, lifestyles, or social actions. Audience members frequently admire their content creators as role models or trusted personalities, which makes creators aware of the importance of credibility and authenticity in their content. Participants emphasize this by saying:

P7: "I am intentionally inquisitive and never share unverified reports. If I am reacting to news, I ensure it comes from a legitimate journalistic source."

P4: "Magproduce ng magandang content na makakapagbigay ng inspirasyon sa manonood at masunod ang policies and guidelines set by Meta." (Produce good content that can inspire viewers and comply with the policies and guidelines set by Meta.)

P8: Palipayan ang amoang audience og makahatag og inspirasyon sa uban na wala pa nagsugod share saila talents. (Entertain our audience and inspire others who have not yet started sharing their talents.)

4. Discussion

The findings portray content creation as a complex form of digital work in which personal purpose, economic opportunity, public visibility, technological demands, and social responsibility intersect. Across the participants' accounts, content creation was not experienced in only one way. Some participants understood it primarily as an extension of their advocacy and personal identity, while others emphasized its economic value, professional opportunities, or capacity to connect with broader audiences. At the same time, these positive experiences were accompanied by workload pressures, public criticism, loss of privacy, and the continuous need to remain visible and relevant. Taken together, the findings indicate that content creation goes beyond the act of producing and posting digital materials; it involves continuous negotiation between personal goals, audience expectations, platform conditions, and the consequences of being publicly visible.

One of the central findings was that participants attached a strong sense of purpose to content creation. Several participants described their online activities as advocacy, education, public service, or a means of sharing experiences that could help other people. This suggests that sustained participation in content creation may be supported not only by financial rewards but also by the perceived social meaning of the work. The creators did not necessarily separate their digital identities from their personal and professional identities. Instead, content creation became a channel through which existing roles, such as educator, advocate, community member, or public servant, could be extended to a wider audience. This finding is particularly meaningful in the Philippine context, where Soriano et al. (2021) observed that digital workers and influencers can occupy community-oriented roles by sharing knowledge, opportunities, and support within platform-based environments. Their concept of digital labor *bayanihan* demonstrates that digital influence can become socially embedded rather than being motivated solely by individual economic advancement.

The purpose-oriented character of the participants' work also supports the argument that social media influence has increasingly expanded beyond product promotion and entertainment. Riedl et al. (2021) described the growing presence of influencers who produce meaningful content and become involved in political, social, and public issues. In the present study, this broader understanding of influence was evident among participants who regarded their platforms as spaces for education, advocacy, healthy lifestyles, public service, and community engagement. Their experiences therefore indicate that being a content creator may involve the development of a public role in which visibility is deliberately used to communicate values and encourage particular forms of awareness or action. This is important because it shifts the conception of content creators from passive producers of entertainment toward active participants in digital public communication.

At the same time, participants identified economic and professional opportunities as important outcomes of content creation. Monetization, professionalization, networking, and improved financial circumstances were described as tangible benefits. For some participants, an activity that began as a hobby eventually became a source of livelihood. These findings illustrate how digital platforms can create alternative pathways to work and income, particularly when creators are able to convert audience attention into economic opportunities. Soriano (2021), in examining digital labor in the Philippines, similarly demonstrated how digital platforms have created new forms of work and intermediation while allowing individuals to participate in economic opportunities that extend beyond conventional employment arrangements. However, such opportunities exist within platform systems over which workers have limited control. This makes content creation simultaneously empowering and uncertain: creators may obtain income and professional recognition, but their opportunities remain partly dependent on platform structures, audiences, and changing digital markets.

This tension became more evident in the participants' experiences of pressure and workload. Maintaining an active content presence required continuous production, scheduling, audience engagement, adaptation, and balancing content creation with other professional responsibilities. Participants who were simultaneously teachers, employees, or professionals experienced particular difficulty managing these competing demands. Their accounts demonstrate that content creation involves a form of labor that may be hidden behind the apparent simplicity of uploading photographs, videos, or posts. Behind visible content are activities such as planning, recording, editing, monitoring engagement, responding to audiences, and maintaining consistency. Duffy et al. (2021) similarly found that creative workers on social media operate under conditions of visibility precarity, where professional success is strongly connected to quantifiable indicators such as likes, shares, subscribers, and audience engagement. They further noted that creators must deal with changes in audience preferences, markets, platform features, and algorithms, producing uncertainty even when creators invest substantial effort in their work.

The participants' experiences therefore suggest that the pressure to remain visible is not entirely self-imposed. Platform structures create an environment where creators may feel the need to remain continuously productive because reduced activity can potentially affect engagement and visibility. This is consistent with Duffy et al.'s (2021) concept of the nested precarities of social media creative labor, in which creators face uncertainty arising from markets, industries, and platform algorithms. In this study, the need to monitor audience engagement, review previous high-performing content, schedule posts, and respond to algorithmic changes illustrates how creators gradually developed an awareness of platform logic. Their work involved not only creativity but also strategic decision-making based on what appeared to generate reach and engagement. Thus, successful content creation was experienced as a combination of creative expression and continuous adaptation to an environment controlled partly by technological systems.

Another significant aspect of the participants' experience involved public scrutiny, criticism, and reduced privacy. Participants reported bashing, negative comments, questioning from viewers, and the loss of personal privacy that accompanied increased visibility. These experiences demonstrate one of the contradictions of digital influence: the same visibility that produces opportunities, followers, and recognition also increases exposure to criticism and unwanted attention. Valenzuela-García et al. (2023) found that social media influencers can become targets of harassment and hate messages because of their persistent public exposure and the ease with which audiences can communicate directly with them. Similarly, Nielsen et al. (2025) showed that platform-mediated work, including influencer work, can involve substantial emotional labor because workers must manage feelings and interactions under conditions characterized by immediacy, widespread distribution, and constant accessibility. These findings help explain why participants in the present study did not describe criticism simply as isolated unpleasant comments; instead, public reactions became part of the broader emotional demands of maintaining a digital presence.

The coping mechanisms identified in the study further demonstrate how creators adapted to these demands. Emotion-focused coping was evident when participants ignored bashers, avoided engagement with trolls, prayed for critics, or redirected their attention toward their intended audience and purpose. Such strategies appear to help creators regulate their emotional reactions when a stressor cannot easily be removed. The findings closely correspond with Haug et al. (2024), whose qualitative study of content creators identified both emotion-focused and problem-focused strategies for managing social media stress. Their study showed that creators can experience stress when audience responses fail to meet expectations and that these effects can extend beyond social media into offline relationships. The responses in the present study suggest that non-engagement was not necessarily passivity. For some creators, deliberately refusing to respond to criticism represented an intentional strategy for conserving emotional energy and preventing negative interactions from interfering with their work.

In contrast, problem-focused coping was demonstrated through planning, content banking, scheduling, audience analysis, production teams, and strategic responses to changes in engagement. These strategies addressed the source of work-related demands more directly. Participants attempted to reduce uncertainty by preparing content in advance, examining successful previous posts, organizing production, and adjusting content when engagement decreased. This finding indicates that coping among content creators was not limited to psychological adjustment. It also involved developing organizational routines that made digital work more manageable. Haug et al. (2024) similarly identified problem-focused coping among social media content creators, supporting the present finding that planning and deliberate behavioral responses can help creators manage platform-related stress. Importantly, the participants' practices demonstrate increasing professionalization: rather than treating

content creation as purely spontaneous activity, creators developed systematic processes comparable to those used in other forms of media production.

Resource-based coping further reflects this professionalization. Participants relied on editing applications, microphones, audio equipment, production tools, and other digital resources to reduce production difficulty and improve the quality of their content. Technology therefore functioned not merely as the medium through which creators distributed content but also as a coping and productivity resource. Easy-to-use editing software and production equipment allowed participants to perform tasks that might otherwise require larger production teams or greater technical expertise. In this sense, digital tools enabled creators to manage some of the practical constraints of content creation independently. However, dependence on these technologies also illustrates how content creators increasingly operate within a larger platform ecosystem in which technical skills, equipment, software familiarity, and connectivity become essential resources for continued participation.

The participants also demonstrated meaning-based coping, particularly through religious faith, personal purpose, and acceptance of circumstances beyond their control. Faith appeared to provide some participants with a framework for interpreting difficulties and maintaining emotional stability when facing uncertainty. Rather than attempting to control every audience response or platform outcome, these participants described entrusting circumstances to God while continuing their work. Meaning-based coping is distinct from simply ignoring a problem because it involves interpreting adversity within a broader system of values and purpose. Although it was examined in a different context, Arslan and Yıldırım (2021) found that meaning-based coping and spirituality were positively associated with subjective well-being under stressful conditions. The present study extends the relevance of this idea to digital creative work by showing that spirituality may also become a personal resource through which some creators sustain perseverance amid criticism, unpredictable engagement, and the psychological demands of online visibility. This interpretation should nevertheless remain contextual, as faith-based coping represented the experience of some participants rather than a universal characteristic of all content creators.

Beyond coping with difficulties, the participants expressed important insights regarding the professional meaning of content creation. Advocacy and service remained prominent, but participants also emphasized ethical responsibility, accuracy, accountability, and the influence they exercised over their audiences. This indicates that participants did not define professional success entirely through follower numbers or monetization. Their understanding of professional content creation included an awareness that greater visibility creates obligations concerning what information is shared and how audiences may be affected by it. Such an understanding becomes especially important when followers treat creators as credible or trusted sources. Balaban et al. (2022) demonstrated that parasocial relationships and perceived influencer credibility can strengthen the persuasive power of social media influencers. Similarly, Wang (2024) found that dimensions of influencer authenticity were

associated with followers' perceptions of trustworthiness and expertise. These findings support the participants' concern that inaccurate or irresponsible content may carry consequences precisely because audiences can develop trust in creators and assign credibility to their messages.

The participants' emphasis on verification and responsible communication also suggests that ethical practice was understood as an integral part of being a content creator rather than merely a requirement imposed by social media platforms. Participants who stressed double-checking information, using legitimate sources, protecting audiences from misleading content, and complying with platform guidelines demonstrated an emerging conception of digital professionalism. Borchers and Enke (2022) similarly found that influencer ethics encompass multiple concerns, including truthfulness, transparency, sincerity, professionalism, caring, respect, and social responsibility. The present findings are consistent with this broader understanding because participants' ethical concerns extended beyond commercial disclosure. They included the possible effects of their content on followers and the responsibility associated with occupying a visible position in an online community.

This ethical dimension is closely related to the participants' understanding of themselves as influencers. Their narratives suggest that influence was understood not simply as popularity but as the capacity to shape perceptions, encourage behavior, provide information, entertain, or inspire others. This distinction is important. A large following provides potential reach, but influence depends on the relationship that creators establish with audiences and the degree of credibility audiences assign to them. Research has shown that social media influencers can function as opinion leaders and that credibility and parasocial relationships contribute to their persuasive capacity (Balaban et al., 2022; Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2022). Consequently, participants' awareness of their ability to influence others may explain why ethical responsibility emerged strongly in their professional reflections. Greater influence can increase opportunities for advocacy, partnerships, and community engagement, but it also increases the possible consequences of inaccurate, misleading, or irresponsible communication.

The findings also demonstrate that influence, opportunity, and vulnerability were interconnected rather than separate experiences. Increased visibility may lead to monetization, professional networks, public recognition, and opportunities to promote advocacy, yet the same visibility exposes creators to stronger audience expectations, criticism, harassment, and privacy concerns. This coexistence of opportunity and precarity is consistent with research describing platformized creative labor as an environment where visibility can simultaneously function as a resource and a vulnerability (Duffy et al., 2021). For the participants in this study, being visible was necessary to reach audiences and sustain their work, but visibility also required emotional regulation, strategic planning, technological adaptation, and ethical awareness. This tension helps explain why participants developed multiple and sometimes complementary coping strategies rather than relying on a single response to the demands of content creation.

From a phenomenographic perspective, the findings are particularly important because they reveal qualitatively different ways of understanding the same phenomenon. Content creation was experienced as advocacy, livelihood, professional work, public exposure, emotional labor, ethical responsibility, and social influence. These understandings were not necessarily contradictory. Instead, they demonstrate how participants assigned different meanings to content creation depending on their purposes, experiences, and relationship with audiences. Some foregrounded its capacity to improve their economic circumstances, while others emphasized service, advocacy, professional identity, or responsibility. Likewise, criticism was experienced by some as an emotional burden and by others as something that could be managed through non-engagement, strategic action, technological resources, or faith. Such variation demonstrates that the experience of being a content creator cannot be reduced to either opportunity or difficulty alone.

Overall, the study suggests that contemporary content creation is best understood as a multidimensional form of platform-mediated work. The participants experienced it as a source of meaning and opportunity while simultaneously confronting unstable engagement, demanding production routines, public scrutiny, and ethical expectations. Their experiences further show that sustaining a digital career requires more than creativity. It requires emotional regulation, planning, technological competence, resilience, awareness of audiences, and responsible communication. In the Philippine context, these findings are particularly relevant because content creators may occupy multiple roles simultaneously—as professionals, workers, advocates, educators, entrepreneurs, and community figures. The findings therefore contribute to a more nuanced understanding of content creation by showing that digital visibility is not merely a measure of popularity; it is a form of social and professional positioning that brings both opportunities and responsibilities to those who participate in it.

5. Conclusion

The findings indicate that content creation is fundamentally a purpose-driven endeavor anchored in advocacy, personal passion, and identity formation. Content creators are not merely producing material for visibility or engagement; rather, their work reflects deeper motivations tied to self-expression and social influence. This intrinsic orientation shapes both the direction and meaning of their content. At the same time, content creation presents significant opportunities, including personal growth, expanded networks, and positive societal impact. These benefits reinforce creators' role as influential agents capable of shaping opinions and fostering community engagement. However, these opportunities are counterbalanced by substantial challenges—such as performance pressure, content demands, and the need to remain relevant in a highly competitive digital environment. Moreover, the presence of public scrutiny and exposure to negative feedback highlights the complex and often taxing nature of the creator experience. This underscores the importance of resilience

and adaptive coping mechanisms among creators. From an insight perspective, content creators recognize their ethical responsibility and accountability, particularly given their influence on audiences. They view their role not only as communicators but also as advocates who must maintain credibility and integrity. Ultimately, while content creation is demanding, it is also transformative—enabling creators to evolve personally and professionally while contributing meaningfully to their communities. In sum, content creation emerges as a dynamic interplay of purpose, opportunity, challenge, and responsibility, where the transformative potential is realized through both the rewards and pressures inherent in the practice.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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