Maynooth University
National University of Ireland Maynooth

Global Platform, Local Labour: Precarious YouTubing in Ireland and Turkey

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A major thesis submitted for the qualification of

Doctor of Philosophy in Media Studies

Maynooth University

Department of Media Studies

November 2022

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Abstract

This thesis investigates creative digital labour practices of Irish and Turkish content creators within the hybrid space of YouTube. It frames YouTube creators who generate or aspire to earn income via the platform as cultural workers in the platform economy by acknowledging the similarities in their working conditions with other platform workers. It also addresses how their media production practices are negotiated and shaped in particular underrepresented national contexts that take place in peripheral economies. Rather than macro-level industry-based approaches, the study employs mixed methods to provide micro-level explanations of platformed content creation. First, it employs methods from ethnography such as semi-structured interviews with YouTube creators and observations in their workplaces to trace the dynamics of production as a culture, to listen to the voices of labourers and to capture creators' own realities in their working lives. Second, it benefits from the walkthrough method to put subjective interpretations of creators into the context of the platform affordances and regulatory frameworks and considers how these factors shape or constrain the activity of creators. This study demonstrates that YouTubing has a precarious nature which shapes creators' working lives and how they form and maintain their professional identities inside or outside YouTube careers. The thesis examines this precarious nature by contextualising creators' media production and distribution practices in the platform architecture; more significantly it draws attention to the complexity of the relationships between platforms, content creator labour and local contexts, which influences the precariousness of creative digital labour. Thus, the study contributes to the dominant literature on YouTube which neglects YouTube creators as shaped by specific economic, political, cultural, and linguistic contexts of nation-states, instead of assuming them to be a homogeneous group under a global platform.

Acknowledgements

Undertaking a PhD is a challenging journey that moves you between contradictory affective states like anxiety and happiness. It becomes even harder especially if you have completed the last two years of this journey under pandemic conditions. Nevertheless, I have been lucky enough to receive the advice and support of many people.

First and foremost, I must acknowledge my supervisors, Dr. Kylie Jarrett and Dr. Sarah Arnold. I owe much to their supervision with constructive feedback which has been instrumental in completing this thesis. Their support and encouragement to develop my academic skills and intellectual thought has been invaluable to me. I will always be thankful for their mentorship which has helped me improve as a scholar.

I am also grateful to Dr. Ergin Bulut, with whom I shared my very initial ideas of this study. This project would not have been the same if he had not recommended Kylie's thought-provoking book *The Digital Housewife* and presented her as a potential supervisor for this project.

I want to thank Dr. Anne O'Brien and Dr. Jeneen Naji in the Department of Media Studies. This thesis has also evolved thanks to their challenging questions and insightful comments during the departmental annual review meetings.

A special thank you goes to my partner in life, Seçkin Göksoy, who has been with me in lots of milestone moments of my life. I am fortunate to receive his love, friendship, support, and encouragement over the years. It was actually our conversations that sparked the idea for this project, and his emotional and intellectual support made its completion easier.

I must reserve my warmest gratitude for my parents Mevlüt and Neşe Bidav who have shown unconditional love and support. I am grateful that my dad is able to see the successful completion of my PhD. Also, I would like to give special thanks to my brother Mustafa who has taken all caring responsibilities of my parents, and that is how I was able to make this journey.

Last but not least, I would like to thank to all research participants who took the time to share their stories. While their contribution made this research possible, their YouTube videos kept me not only entertained but also motivated.

This research was financially supported by the John and Pat Hume Doctoral Scholarship at Maynooth University and by the COVID-19 Costed Extensions Programme of the Higher Education Authority and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in Ireland.

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

AKP	Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi / Justice and Development Party
AMSD	Audiovisual Media Services Directive
BAI	Broadcasting Authority of Ireland
BTK	Bilgi Teknolojileri ve İletişim Kurumu / Information and Communication Technologies Authority
CCI	Creative and Cultural Industries
CPM	Cost per mille
DIY	Do-it-yourself
DMCA	Digital Millennium Copyright Act
EU	European Union
HDP	Halkların Demokratik Partisi / Peoples' Democratic Party
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex
MCN	Multi-Channel Network
PGC	Professionally Generated Content
PH	Production House
RD	Reklamcılar Derneği / Turkish Association of Advertising Agencies
RTÜK	Radyo ve Televizyon Üst Kurulu / Radio and Television Supreme Council
SME	Social Media Entertainment
SMP	Social Media Platform
TİB	Telekomünikasyon İletişim Başkanlığı / Telecommunications Communication Presidency
ToS	Terms of Service
UGC	User-Generated Content
YPP	YouTube Partner Programme

Chapter 1

Introduction

YouTubing – the practices of browsing, watching, or producing video content on YouTube – emerged less than two decades ago. Even in the earliest period of its existence though, it attracted mainstream attention. For instance, *Time* magazine's 'Person of the Year' for 2006 was announced as 'You' to acknowledge those who contributed to the creative digital culture and to celebrate the democratisation of cultural production thanks to the affordances of Web 2.0 (Grossman, 2006). 'You' currently refers to billions of people around the world to whom YouTube has been a digital platform to watch funny videos, learn how-to-do things, promote their work, build social networks, master their knowledge about particular topics of interest, fundraise for philanthropic purposes as well as make a media career as a content creator. For the people whose experiences are told in this dissertation, YouTube is a platform in which they produce and distribute their creative content and build audiences to establish a media career with ideally a liveable income or to create a stepping-stone to other media sectors.

This newly emerged media career as a YouTube creator with the rise in do-it-yourself (DIY) media has also been celebrated in local media scenes, where the success of YouTube creators in Turkey and Ireland is featured. In Turkish newspapers and magazines, it is not unexpected to see headlines such as "YouTubers of Turkey" (*CNN Türk*, 2016), "Turkey's highest-paid YouTubers" (*Haber Global*, 2020), "10 Turkish YouTubers who are both successful and make good money" (Ceylan, n.d.), and "You may not know but they have hundreds of thousands of followers: The most famous YouTubers of Turkey" (costanza, 2016). Irish media also uses similar headlines including "Irish YouTuber earns more than €1m" (Deegan, 2017), "The young Irish people who are cashing in on YouTube" (McGreevy, 2015), and "From beauty vloggers to Minecraft: Ireland's top YouTube earners" (*Irish Examiner*, 2018). What is common in these news stories or magazine articles is that there is little or no acknowledgement of the various forms of labour that YouTube video production and distribution require. Rather, they highlight how YouTubers have become celebrities, how they have reached a large following base and more significantly how they have

started to make a living from YouTubing. Additionally, there is a lack of attention to various challenges experienced by Irish and Turkish YouTube creators associated with both platform specific aspects of their work and their local production contexts. To move beyond the discourses of fame and the focus on money, academic attention must be paid to the complexity of platformed content creator labour on YouTube. This dissertation is about such complexity and accordingly explores the behind-the-scenes of YouTube production in two different national contexts: Ireland and Turkey.

In Ireland and Turkey, like in other locations, an attempt to understand YouTube media production and distribution requires the consideration of a network of actors: content creators, the platform, audiences, multi-channel networks (MCNs), advertisers as well as nation-states which shape contexts of media production and distribution. These different agents which interact with or depend on each other in multiple ways form a complex web of production relations. The labour of YouTube creators primarily depends on the platform which provides creators with access to audience and advertisers as well as mediates and governs their production practices via its policies and algorithms. Secondly, the generation of income via platformed content creation relies heavily on building a sustainable audience base. This makes audiences important actors in production relations as creators need to spare time and energy to establish and maintain good relations with their audiences. MCNs have also emerged as actors having an intermediary role between creators and advertisers, professionalising YouTube production. Furthermore, since platformed content creation is advertiser-funded, creators need to comply with advertiser-friendly content guidelines on YouTube as well as negotiate their creative practices with advertisers off-platform for external brand deals. Lastly, nation-states emerge as actors since the labour practices of YouTube creators are also situated in national contexts of creation. It is therefore important to consider the role that nation-states play in restricting, regulating, and shaping certain creative and productive actions. This study, however, takes content creators as main agents of media production within this network of actors in order to look behind-the-scenes and pay attention to media producers' working lives. The research, nevertheless, aims to explore creative digital labour practices of Irish and Turkish YouTube creators with respect to their production relations with all these agents.

From Homemade Videos to A Precarious YouTubing Career

Understanding how YouTube content creators have become new agents in media production and attracted mainstream as well as scholarly attention necessitates exploring aspects of digitalisation and platformisation of media production and distribution. The development of internet technologies that allow people to access communication and information over the World Wide Web (WWW) has given rise to the virtualisation of production and consumption practices as in the case of social media, streaming media, and e-commerce. With the emergence of commercial platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitch and TikTok, online user activities have been integrated into an expanded capital accumulation process. This has led to various forms of professionalisation in digital media production and industrialisation of social media entertainment (SME) but also resulted in precarious labour practices on digital platforms.

The emergence of Web 2.0 as an enhancement in internet technologies has created participatory media which refers to digital platforms in which users are actively engaged in creating and distributing content (O'Reilly, 2012). Facilitated by such technological developments, "the roles of creator and audience, maker and user, producer and consumer become blurred" within social media platforms (SMPs) as they become imbued with user-generated content (UGC) (Chandler and Munday, 2016, n.p.). In relation to this, a participatory digital culture and new labour practices linked to the creative and cultural industries (CCIs) have emerged. These practices are continuations of earlier shifts in labour trends as work is no longer confined to factories. Especially after the second half of the 20th century, the entire social terrain is integrated into value generation under the capitalist economy by blurring the boundaries between production and consumption, production and reproduction, and work time and free time (Hardt and Negri, 2000, pp. 402-403). Increases in computerisation and internet usage have contributed to this shift, which has resulted in the development of the internet as a new factory (Scholz, 2013). With the emergence of new modes of production and distribution via digital technologies (Fisher and Fuchs, 2015), the digital economy has become "the fastest and most visible zone of production within late capitalist societies" (Terranova, 2000, p. 47). The labour of

YouTubing which produces UGC has been successfully integrated into this growing digital economy.

YouTube started its journey as a platform for sharing homemade videos. The history of homemade video indeed goes back to the early 1900s with the availability of consumer grade video cameras; the development of mobile phones with built-in cameras in 2000 further catalysed amateur video-making (Willett, 2009). Technological developments have, therefore, provided not only professionals in media industries but also amateurs and hobbyists with the means of video production. Digitalisation has especially transformed the distribution of video outputs following the proliferation of online video-sharing platforms (Buckingham, 2009; Willett, 2009). YouTube, among other platforms, accommodates a technological system of homecasting which indicates uploading and downloading "self-produced or preproduced audiovisual content via personal computers *from the home* and to *anybody's home*" (van Dijck, 2013b, p. 148, original emphasis). Despite what the word homecasting suggests, YouTubing is not confined to the domestic sphere. In other words, YouTube media production takes place across the world in numerous production locations including content creators' homes, studios, and multiple exterior production sites such as streets and parks. By dint of broader changes in social life such as increased desire for documenting and representing one's life fuelled by the increase in smartphone usage and accessibility of handy portable digital cameras by non-professionals, every place has turned into a potential media production site (Buckingham, 2009, p. 232). Easily uploading self-produced videos from everywhere to YouTube via the internet has augmented YouTube's popularity and fostered its business. YouTube has accordingly gathered global content creators and audiences under its platform.

A further significance of digitalisation is that these new entrants to media production have also gained access not only to audience but also to advertisers, and thereby lowering traditional barriers to entry to media industries and facilitating, in part, their professionalisation (Dwyer, 2019, pp. 170-171). By supporting creative media production and foregrounding participatory culture, YouTube offers "value to advertisers, entertainment to audiences, and infrastructures and audiences to creators" (Burgess, 2021, p. 26). That is, the platform emerges as a core cultural intermediary among these agents and facilitates the translation of cultural capital into economic

capital which generates revenue for itself, advertisers as well as creators (Hutchinson, 2017). To better grasp this capital translation process, it is now important to mention how capital, more specifically cultural capital, is conceptualised in the case of YouTubing.

This study utilises Bourdieu's (2002, p. 280) conceptualisation of capital as "accumulated labor" which can be either in its materialised or embodied form. According to Bourdieu (2002), capital can exist in different forms including economic, cultural, social, and symbolic which can be convertible but irreducible to each other. Cultural capital referring to cultural knowledge and competences can be embodied via inheriting from one's family or gaining through experience; objectified in the form of cultural artefacts; and institutionalised by acquiring educational titles and formal degrees (Bourdieu, 1984; 2002). In the context of YouTubing, cultural capital refers to all these different forms. To explain, YouTube creators leverage their embodied cultural capital (i.e., their cultural knowledge on SME gained via participating the YouTube creator culture or their video production and distribution skills) and institutionalised cultural capital (i.e., their academic qualifications which may help them to build an online creator persona) to produce creative content which is also cultural capital in its objectified form.

YouTube acts as an intermediary in the process of translating cultural capital into economic one by organising relations between different agents including advertisers, creators, and audiences. By utilising the platform's infrastructure, creators use their cultural capital to attract audience attention, accumulate social capital by forming a network of intimate connections with their audiences and later use all these "to establish an authentic relation between brands and consumers" (Arriagada, 2021, p. 244). For YouTube creators, therefore, building a successful media career requires translating their cultural and social capital into monetary gain by using the platform's economic and sociotechnical affordances.

Social media creators, therefore, not only produce and distribute creative content but also need to manage audience communities (Cunningham and Craig, 2021b, p. 8). What is common within this emerging economy of creator culture is that "people's very selves become products … as, regardless of what they produce, being 'authentic' and forming relationships that feel intimate to audiences become germane to making

a living" (Baym, 2021, p. ix). Thus, managing their community of followers involves a performance of authenticity resembling the earlier tradition of "homecamming" explored by Senft (2008) in her study on camgirls who engaged in broadcasting their authentic selves from the domestic sphere on the way to become microcelebrities. Similarly, homecasting on YouTube involving performances of authenticity has created a new digital culture of vernacular video forms produced by these new creative agents who later gained access to the platform's monetisation tools and commercialised their intimate relations with audiences.

All of these have created the field of SME wherein amateur content creators are professionalised into new creative agents who build a career by monetising their significant audience base (Cunningham and Craig, 2019, p. 5). In the earlier stages, homecasting was the most prevalent way of sharing homemade videos for expressing ones' self, ideas, and feelings and for social networking. Later, the collaboration with existing broadcast organisations that generate professional content and the emergence of MCNs to spark advertisers' interest have resulted in a more complex web of production relations in more complicated workplaces. In addition to independent professionalising creators and mass media companies, production houses (PHs) have also integrated into the platform economy of YouTube. Although there is a growing body of literature on platformed content creators (Cunningham and Craig, 2019; Lange, 2019), YouTubing in PHs has mostly been overlooked.

In this study, I define PHs as new generation media companies which professionally produce and distribute social media content via a team of creators. PHs may differ in size and scope. For instance, there are PHs like a US-based digital media company *BuzzFeed* founded by internet entrepreneurs and operate across multiple platforms as well as others founded by individual YouTube creators with a big audience base. PHs, on the one hand, mimic the organisational structure of legacy media companies as they hire a number of media workers including directors, video editors and content editors and mostly follow a hierarchical and sometimes blurred division of labour in the processes of media production and distribution. On the other hand, they adhere to YouTube's creator cultures by creating content native to social media in terms of trends and genre as well as maintaining authenticity in their content and forming audience relations.

PHs are different from MCNs and talent management agencies because they are not intermediaries whose role is to assist creators on the way to professionalise their content and thereby increase their income with more brand partnerships. Rather, they are YouTube partners who produce their own content via a team of media workers and monetise those creative outputs like individual creators do. Their role in the YouTube economy, however, is critical. Due to their corporate-like structure, they engage in consistent advertiser and family friendly content creation. Therefore, they would be preferred more by advertisers for brand safety reasons, increasing competition in the field of SME for individual creators. Concerning their important role in the YouTube economy, this study, therefore, includes the working life of YouTube creators who work in PHs and focus on their shared experiences and concerns with individual creators regarding aspects of content creator labour.

Making a media career from YouTubing, however, is a risky endeavour for creators, especially for those working outside of formal workplaces like PHs, as not all of them manage to secure a liveable income. This is because conditions of content creator labour are "volatile and precarious but also more empowered" in comparison to more established media industries (Cunningham and Craig, 2021b, p. 2). First of all, platformed content creation emerged in the internet factory, and is "devoid of the worker protections of even the most precarious working-class jobs", similar to other web-based environments (Scholz, 2013, p. 1). That is, creators in the SME industry work outside of standard employment relations and are therefore deprived of usual benefits such as stable income, insurance, and sick leave. This particularly stems from the way YouTube structurally frames its creators as independent contractors who are bounded by "an entrepreneurial competition for audience and resources" (Caplan and Gillespie, 2020, p. 4). There is, therefore, a power asymmetry between the platform which performs top-down governance over creators through its regulations and creators who also engage in self-governance as risk-bearing creative agents (Cunningham and Craig, 2021a). While paying attention to these aspects of YouTube labour, this study also investigates how creators form their professional identities in relation to YouTubing and illuminates the diversity and ambivalence in their professional identities due to the precarious nature of their work.

Furthermore, platformed content creation has not only changed *who* produces media but also *how* media is produced. To explain, the labour of YouTube creators is very

much shaped by new media technologies as in the case of algorithmic turn in media production and consumption (Napoli, 2014). Thus, algorithms must be recognised as playing a significant role in creative digital labour practices of YouTube creators. From a purely technical perspective, the term algorithm refers to "a formal process or set of step-by-step procedures, often expressed mathematically" (Striphas, 2015, p. 403). Algorithms, however, are part of the sociotechnical assemblage of the platform architectures because platform users interact with these invisible infrastructures by "consciously or unconsciously follow[ing] their instructions" (Gran, Booth and Bucher, 2021, p. 1779). For platform users, the YouTube algorithm restructures media consumption by personalising user experience through its algorithmic recommendation system. In other words, the platform algorithm shapes "cultural encounters and cultural landscapes" by promoting certain content over others and thereby paves the way for the emergence of algorithmic cultures (Beer, 2013, p. 97).

The algorithmic culture of YouTube restructures not only media consumption by shaping user taste and preferences but also media production as it directly relates to the work culture of creators. The key function of the algorithms in the context of platformed content creation is about "the visibility of culture, and of particular forms of culture that algorithmically finds its audience" (Beer, 2013, p. 97). Thus, creators whose success and thereby income depends on the visibility of their content try to develop algorithmic skills by interpreting how algorithms affect their reach and adapting content decisions accordingly to get more subscribers (Klawitter and Hargittai, 2018). In addition to affecting creators' decisions on media production, the platform algorithm has also other implications on the working conditions. While some creators may face algorithmic discrimination which deprioritises them from recommendation based on their identity, content, and audience size (Glatt, 2022), YouTube's algorithmic curation of content creates "structural uncertainty" for all creators (Poell, Nieborg and Duffy, 2022, p. 94).

Both independent creators and those working in PHs who generate income through/for YouTube experience "algorithmic precarity" (Duffy, 2020) stemming from the non-transparent and changeable nature of the algorithms which determine video contents' visibility on the platform (Bishop, 2019). Within this algorithmic culture, the emergence of entertainment trends and the need for following them to increase visibility has also an effect on creators' labour practices. In addition to precarity

through algorithmic change and trend changes, "platform precarity" within the competitive social media ecosystem contributes to the instability of creators' work and has both financial and emotional consequences for creators (Cunningham and Craig, 2019). This study, therefore, examines how the platformisation of media production creates precarious working conditions for YouTube creators and documents various risk management strategies performed by creators.

While these work dynamics shape how content creators experience platform specific precarity, this research also seeks to understand how YouTube production differs in particular national contexts – Ireland and Turkey. This is because YouTubing as a form of creative digital labour not only takes place in this new internet factory as it is mediated by a global digital platform but also depends on geographical contexts of creation.

Global Platform, Local Labour

YouTube is the second most visited website in the world following Google according to the Digital 2021 Global Overview Report (*we are social* and *Hootsuite*, 2021). YouTube's domination over online video streaming in particular constitutes a current example of media globalisation. A new era has indeed begun in media globalisation with the rise of digital platforms in which "SME content is largely 'born global'" (Cunningham and Craig, 2016, p. 5414). This is because YouTube, unlike traditional media which "produces, owns, or licenses content for distribution, exhibition, or sale in multiple territories", does not establish its operating model around intellectual property control (Cunningham and Craig, 2016, p. 5415). Rather it acts as an intermediary between content creators and advertisers. Additionally, YouTube's commercial initiatives, including localisation strategies that provide location-based services in local languages around the world, have contributed to its globalisation (Benson, 2017, p. 101). All of these have allowed YouTube to gather global content creators whose labour practices are very much shaped by the platform's governance strategies including its policies and use of algorithms in various areas such as monetisation and content recommendations (Bishop, 2020; Caplan and Gillespie, 2020; Cunningham and Craig, 2019). This, however, does not necessarily mean the homogenisation of working conditions for content creation.

Despite enabling global production and reception of media, there are various "local YouTube scenes" that have emerged alongside localised versions of the platform as well as with the integration of MCNs into the SME industry (Burgess and Green, 2018, p. 133). Studying such local YouTube production cultures requires more than on-platform exploration (i.e., looking at the production of location-based data, the availability of locally relevant content and the displaying local ads). Rather, it necessitates looking at how the state with its wider socio-political environment impacts creative practices (Mohan and Punathambekar, 2019; Punathambekar and Mohan, 2019; Mehta, 2020). Prior to the emergence of platformed content creation, studies of film and television production have already addressed the importance of geographic location in shaping media production practices (Landman, 2009; Levine, 2009; Tinic, 2009). In the case of platformed content creation, this approach has been relatively neglected as most research assumes content creators are a homogeneous group under a global platform. There is, however, some research focusing outside of the Anglo-centric and English-speaking world, and that has demonstrated how the labour of digital creators is performed in the nexus of market, and cultural politics of state and society (Cunningham, Craig and Lv, 2019; Limkangvanmongkol and Abidin, 2019). This study also acknowledges the significance of national contexts in the case of YouTube content creation and takes location as one of the key variables that affects the dynamics of media production. Hence, this research is conducted in two underrepresented national contexts – Ireland and Turkey – which have different political, economic, sociocultural as well as linguistic factors shaping media production.

One factor contributing to the emergence of local YouTube scenes is the differences in the internet governance regimes. This is because the internet itself as a sociotechnical artefact is very much situated in national contexts (Goggin and McLelland, 2009). This, on the one hand, refers to the different ways in which people engage with the internet in their local contexts and, on the other hand, to the disparities between different regional or nation-state-based internet regulations. Although YouTube is a U.S. based global digital platform, there have always been concerns over access, distribution of content and advertising due to such diversities in regulatory frameworks (Cunningham and Craig, 2016, p. 5410). In order to comply with different internet regulatory regimes, digital platforms including YouTube employ a filtering

technology called geoblocking which enables controlling access to certain content based on location, language as well as advertising markets (Lobato, 2016a, p. 10). Since geoblocking "as a 'soft' form of cultural regulation" functions in the nexus of YouTube's commercial interests and the cultural politics of nation states (Lobato, 2016a, p. 10), it important to describe the current media landscapes in Ireland and Turkey.

The Irish mediascape is currently regulated by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) which is established under the Broadcasting Act 2009 and replaced the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland (BCI) and the Broadcasting Complaints Commission (BCC) (Carolan and O'Neill, 2019, pp. 475-476). This act granted an authority to this new governing body "relating to such diverse matters as content, complaints about broadcaster conduct, licensing, funding, technological standards and media plurality" (Carolan and O'Neill, 2019, p. 476). Furthermore, Ireland as a member state of European Union (EU) is also subject to EU-wide rules under the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AMSD) which was last revised in 2018. The BAI is the responsible agent for implementing the revised AMSD which, for the first time, requires EU member states to regulate online video-sharing platforms in the areas such as "the protection of minors, combatting certain criminal offences, the introduction of advertising rules and preventing incitement to violence and hatred" (Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, 2019, p. 12). The Irish state has a significant role regarding the implementation of these rules on the part of video-sharing platforms including YouTube whose main European operations are in Dublin. While governing media service providers to protect children, consumers, as well as European cultural heritage, the AMSD also aims to prevent over or unfair regulation of these service providers via limiting the regulatory power at national level (Carolan and O'Neill, 2019, p. 539). Turkey as a non-EU country, on the other hand, has its own internet regulations which are very much formulated in continuum with traditional media content regulations shaped by the cultural politics of the state. As will be discussed in much more detail in Chapter 6, internet regulations are currently implemented by Information and Communication Technologies Authority (Bilgi Teknolojileri ve İletişim Kurumu, BTK) in accordance with the national internet law passed by the Turkish parliament in 2007. This law, which has been changed many times since then, has always manifested itself in practice by restricting freedom of expression and

censoring certain media outputs. By acknowledging the differences in internet governance, this study aims to explore in what ways YouTube creators' media production practices are governed by local or regional regulatory frameworks in addition to the platform policies.

Furthermore, most research focusing on platformed content creation in the English-speaking world fails to consider that globally distributed media content does not necessarily guarantee a global audience. This is primarily because media consumption is very much a situated practice. In the first place, media consumption on YouTube is situated in the platform's socio-technical architecture concerning localised versions and algorithmically determined content recommendations. Customising location and language options may have little effect on content recommendations which are determined by the previous watching history of users as Benson (2017, p. 102) mentions; however, this certainly affects when users access the platform for the first time since the primary aim of localisation is to display locally relevant content to users in their local languages. Nevertheless, local versions of YouTube do not eliminate the possibility of initiating an interaction between content creators and audiences who access the platform from a different geographic location or are using the platform in a different language (Benson, 2017, p. 109). In that case, Irish creators might seem to be advantaged as they primarily produce English language content. Within this global media consumption environment, however, audiences continue to remain as culturally situated subjects (Jensen and Helles, 2015). That is, for Irish creators, reaching a global audience also comes with challenges such as making relatable content. Most popular Irish YouTube creators, for example, produce gameplay content which is more accessible to a wider English-speaking audience. This is because online video game culture creates its own language as gamers develop "unique communication styles using a game-specific language form" (Bawa, 2018, p. 2714).

As Turkish YouTube creators mostly produce Turkish language content, their channels appeal to a Turkish-speaking audience. YouTube (n.d.-m), for example, affords automatic captions and machine translation, and encourages its creators to use their own closed captions and subtitles to reach a larger international audience. However, machine-generated captions and translations lack accuracy especially in peripheral languages and thus most Turkish creators, including the research participants in this study, tend not to systematically use this facility or use creator-

generated captions and subtitles that require extra skills and time. Their audiences are, therefore, fragmented first and foremost by language. There are certainly other reasons for audience fragmentation on YouTube such as taste preferences that are highly shaped by the wider sociocultural and political context wherein audiences are situated. For Turkish creators, locally and culturally relevant content also refers to content which does not touch upon cultural, political, religious, or moral sensitivities of local audiences. Since online distribution of media products has also created new relationships between content creators and their audiences (Buckingham, 2009, p. 235), receiving possible negative reactions from audiences in the case of failure to be mindful of those sensitivities might result in audience flight and thereby affect their income. Hence, this study pays attention to different cultural factors affecting the global distribution of YouTube videos and how this may eventually create economic precarity for creators.

Moreover, local YouTube production cultures may also be affected by the different ways in which economic and political factors shape the wider media landscape in different geographies. One aspect of platform localisation is that YouTube provides different revenue models for each country because of the differences in AdSense revenues coming from advertisers. Thus, it becomes important to consider the state of the advertising industry at the national level, which is very much dependent on the nature of a country's economy. Another aspect affecting local production cultures is the availability of major events such as VidCon which provides a venue for creators, their fans, and platform innovators to interact with each other or the platform initiatives such as YouTube Spaces which support creators with a more professional set-up to film their videos. In this regard, both countries might be considered as peripheries regarding platformed content creation because Irish and Turkish creators do not have access to these facilities due to the two countries' relatively small markets – one because of population size and the other because of language. This makes the state support for the development of SME more important.

Both Ireland and Turkey have small markets and are peripheral economies, but media industries play a role in their economies to different extents. Cultural industries, particularly the audiovisual sector, in Ireland have been one of the main sectors for employment and revenue generation. For example, Olsberg SPI, commissioned by the Irish government, published a report investigating the economic impact of Irish Screen

Sectors including Film, TV, Animation, and Games. This report shows that "the Irish audiovisual sector generated €1.05 billion in gross value added in 2016 and supported employment of 16,930 full-time equivalents of which 10,560 was direct employment", and the industry has a promising growth potential (Olsberg SPI with Nordicity, 2017, p. 4). The Irish state, therefore, strives to integrate Ireland into global media networks especially concerning film and television production (O'Brien, 2019, p. 4). Accordingly, Irish "policy documents foreground vague notions of 'innovation', 'digital' and 'creativity' as potential saviours to Ireland's economic woes" (Morgan, 2013, p. 148). The Audiovisual Action Plan launched by the Irish government as part of the Creative Ireland Programme in 2016 can be seen as a supportive initiative that "places creativity at the centre of public policy" and imagines Ireland as "a Global hub for the production of Film, TV Drama and Animation" (*Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht*, n.d., p. 8). Hence, the support for various forms of creative labour and entrepreneurship facilitates events such as the Digital Hustle Summer School hosted by Institute of Technology Carlow and funded by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in 2021. The Turkish state has also engaged in supporting digital content creation, despite the restrictive internet regulations. In 2017, as part of the plan called the Digital Transformation Movement for Turkey, the Turkish Employment Agency (Türkiye İş Kurumu, İŞKUR) formed a partnership with Google Turkey which started to provide training such as "Digital Entrepreneurship" and "How to Become a YouTuber" in selected cities across the country (İŞKUR, n.d., p. 99). While these examples demonstrate the relationship between national action plans and the increased shift towards platform work, this study aims to understand whether these kinds of state support have a value in the precarious work of the research participants.

Looking at the two countries provides an alternative way of understanding precarious labour practices on YouTube. This is because the study takes various geographic specificities into consideration such as different political climates that affect the levels of access and participation; the effect of language on the global distribution of media outputs; creator – audience relations situated in different sociocultural contexts; and wider local media landscapes shaped by economic and political factors. These geographic factors that are underrepresented in the dominant literature are incorporated into this research by examining Irish and Turkish YouTube creators' diversified experiences. Taking these dynamics into consideration produces new

insight into how practices of a global digital labour are performed in different localities.

Overview of Chapters

Following this introductory chapter, the second chapter, "Platformed Cultural Production: Creative Digital Labour of YouTube Creators", presents a review of the existing literature on work and labour with a specific focus on platformed content creation on YouTube. First, I situate the work of YouTube content creators in the wider platform economy by pointing out the shared working conditions between content creators and other platform workers. I then closely examine platformed content creation to lay out the specifics of this sector in the platform economy. In parallel with this, I analyse the political economy of SMPs that centres on the monetisation of UGC as well as the professionalisation of UGC into precarious media work in the platform economy. Following this, I conceptualise YouTube as a hybrid commercial platform to situate the research participants within this hybrid space. Lastly, I look at the growth of media intermediaries like MCNs in YouTube's creative economy. I conclude this chapter by pointing out this study's contributions to the examined literature on platformed content creation.

The third chapter, "Researching Platformed Content Creation", presents the methodological approach taken in designing and conducting this research and in analysing the findings. I start by providing a rationale for selecting a qualitative research approach. Then, I look at three different methodological approaches to study platformed content creation: First, I provide an overview of political economy approaches as this study benefits from them to locate creative digital labour practices of YouTubers into a broader framework of platform economies. I then discuss why this approach is not suitable for undertaking this research. Second, drawing on existing research, I outline the limits of textual analysis when approaching a text on YouTube as a discrete form such as videos or written audience comments. Rather, I propose to frame YouTube as a multimodal text and explain how this study benefited from the walkthrough method to inform the discussion of platformed creative labour by identifying the platform affordances and regulatory frameworks. Then, I present the value of ethnographic frameworks which provided methods including semi-structured

interviews and observations to undertake this research. Following this, the chapter describes the procedures of data collection as well as data analysis.

The fourth chapter, "Making a Media Career on and beyond YouTube: Diversity in Professional Identities of YouTube Creators", focuses on how the research participants engage in DIY career making which requires flexibility to shift between different professional identities. First, I suggest looking at YouTubing beyond dichotomies such as amateur/professional and commercial/non-commercial in order not to reduce its complexity. Second, I describe how YouTube content creation emerged as a profession. Then, I explore different modes of YouTubing in relation to the division of labour to demonstrate its complexity which ultimately affects the professional identities creators claim. Lastly, the chapter takes a closer look at the research participants' self-descriptions regarding how they define their practices of YouTubing. In relation to this, I demonstrate the diversity among the research participants in terms of their motivations, professional identities they claim, the types of employment categories under which they work, and their future career prospects.

The fifth chapter, "The Platformisation of Precarity in Social Media Entertainment", investigates how the dynamics of platformisation in the case of YouTubing create precarious working conditions for creators and how this precarity shapes creators' labour practices and experience of work. I begin by describing processes which gave rise to the precarisation of work in the capitalist economy. Then, I specifically focus on precarity in the digital age as the platformisation of cultural production adds new dynamics to the organisation of work and labour. Following this, and drawing on the research participants' experiences, I look at the platform's regulatory frameworks, its algorithmic culture, changes in entertainment trends, and the competitive platform ecosystem to elucidate the dynamics that make YouTubing precarious. Lastly, the chapter investigates in what ways MCNs are faced with precarity and generate precarious working conditions for creators. Overall, in this chapter, I foreground how the precarious nature of YouTubing is primarily dependent on the dynamics of platformisation.

The sixth chapter, "Localisation of Precarity in Social Media Entertainment", examines the role of geographic specificities in making creators' work precarious despite their labour practices being mediated by a global platform. First, I emphasise

the necessity of considering different local aspects in understanding the labour of content creators and define how I understand localisation in the case of YouTubing. Then, I respectively look at the case of Irish and Turkish creators to highlight different geographical dynamics that make them precarious. While Irish creators point out the challenges of YouTubing in a small country considering its population size, Turkish creators recognise more diverse factors such as the unstable nature of the Turkish economy, restrictive internet governance regimes of the state and challenges of engaging local audiences. The chapter, therefore, draws attention to the significance of local dynamics in understanding the precarious nature of YouTubing which cannot be solely examined via the aspects of platformisation.

Finally, the seventh chapter, "Conclusion" summarises the key points emerged from this study and its contributions to the field of platformed content creation. The chapter also acknowledges the limitations of this study and gives an overview of potential future research.

Chapter 2

Platformed Cultural Production: Creative Digital Labour of YouTube Creators

Introduction

In this chapter, I offer a comprehensive examination of the research field of platformed content creation with particular attention to YouTubing. The literature review presented in this chapter draws from a diverse range of research focusing on work and labour in not only the platform economy but also creative and cultural industries. First, I discuss how the rise of the platform economy transformed work and labour in various sectors, and then frame YouTube creators as cultural workers in the platform economy by acknowledging the similarities in their working conditions to other platform workers. Secondly, I move to a more focused discussion on platformed cultural production to explore the specifics of this sector in the platform economy. I start with a discussion of the significance of UGC in the political economy of social media platforms and then explore the rise of new creative and cultural workers who monetise UGC. Thirdly, I shift my focus to YouTube as the case study platform of this research and define it as a hybrid commercial platform. Following this, I explore various forms of labour practices performed by YouTube creators. Lastly, I focus on media intermediaries such as MCNs that are native to the platformed content creation. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the contributions of this study to the research field of platformed content creation.

Platform Mediated Labour

Digital platforms that are "complicated mixtures of software, hardware, operations, and networks" have become central agents in contemporary capitalism (Kenney and Zysman, 2016, p. 64). To draw attention to the centrality of platforms as economic actors in the reorganisation of work and labour, Kenney and Zysman (2016) use the term "platform economy" and Srnicek (2017) coins the term "platform capitalism". Within capitalist systems, platforms are intermediaries which are economically sustained by value generating digital human activities. More specifically, their

economic power comes from their strategic position between various groups as they provide infrastructures to facilitate exchanges between these groups and keep track of all the activities to extract economic value (Srnicek, 2017, p. 255). Platforms, however, are "socio-technical assemblages" (Gillespie, 2017, p. 255). Taking this aspect into consideration, van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018, p. 2) suggest the term "platform society" as platforms not only enable economic exchange via their technological infrastructure but also actively produce societal structures. To clarify, they shape economic, political, and social activity in different areas of life such as how we live, how we socialise, how we consume media, as well as how we work. While acknowledging this hybrid nature of platforms, this study primarily concentrates on platforms mediating creative work because of the significant transformations in labour that have accompanied platforms' rise to dominance.

Owing to new digital technologies, the platform economy has generated new forms of employment as well as value creation opportunities. Platform mediated labour is comprised of a range of sectors and services, from "digitally mediated service work" including cleaning services like Handy, taxi services such as Uber, food delivery services like Deliveroo or freelance workers services such as TaskRabbit (van Doorn, 2017, p. 900) to crowdwork platforms forming a new internet factory such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, Upwork or Clickworker (Altenried, 2020; Webster, 2016). In the case of service work, platforms function as labour markets that organise location-based gig or contract work and facilitate interaction between workers and clients whereas crowdwork platforms operate between workers and clients who want to hire individual contractors for micro-tasks that can mostly be done remotely (Kenney and Zysman, 2019, pp. 24-26).

Apart from these two forms of labour, digitally mediated cultural consumption and production on SMPs has emerged as another sector in which the dynamics of these new value generating activities can be traced. However, this form of labour has been mostly marginalised in the literature on platform work and labour, which raises the significance of understanding cross-over between social media work and other forms of platform work. Just like other platforms mediating service work or crowdwork that organise economic exchanges between various agents, SMPs connect advertisers who promote their brands, content creators who monetise their content, and users who consume content. Therefore, YouTube content creators who generate or aspire to earn

income via the platform, along with other social media workers such as those on Instagram, TikTok and Twitch, can be classified as platform workers and more specifically cultural workers in the platform economy (Niebler and Kern, 2020, p. 3).

In the case of SMPs, the term platform, unlike 'network' or 'broadcaster', does not stand for "an active form of mediation" as platforms have a minor role in content creation (Bishop, 2018a, p. 72). In other words, SMPs, rather than producing content, provide services such as hosting, organising, and distributing UGC and enabling interactions among users while also utilising data emerging from users' activities for economic gain (Gillespie, 2017, p. 254). Consequently, the platformisation of cultural production refers to the successful integration of the governmental structures, economic operations, and sociotechnical infrastructures of commercial production into the social web which fundamentally affects media production, consumption, and distribution practices (Nieborg and Poell, 2018, p. 4276; Nieborg, Poell and Deuze, 2019, p. 85).

Furthermore, SMPs have a dual quality, enabling not only economic but also social, cultural as well as political exchanges between several groups. On the one hand, the word 'social' attached to media denotes that platforms are places of socialisation, networking, collaboration as well as entertainment by encouraging user participation (van Dijck, 2013a, p. 11). On the other hand, they are sites of value creation and capital accumulation through data. Helmond (2015, p. 8) argues that the platformisation of what was previously called social networking sites rests on a dual logic which indicates "platforms' expansion into the rest of the web and, simultaneously, their drive to make external web and app data platform ready". Relying on this combined logic of sociality and datafication, YouTube, along with other SMPs, has initiated new value generating activities that are formalised into precarious media careers such as YouTube creator (Kenney and Zysman, 2016, p. 63).

Since platform work is comprised of diverse sectors and services, employment status of platform workers as well as type of compensation and working conditions offered by the platforms to their workers differ from each other (Kenney and Zysman, 2019, p. 16). Despite the rich diversity in platform mediated work, all platform labour has a similar contradictory nature: On the one hand, these platforms promise flexibility and autonomy to their workers, on the other hand, they create precarious working

conditions as the platforms diverge from standard employment relations, shifting the risks of precarious employment and work onto workers (Woodcock and Graham, 2020). As Casilli and Posada (2019, p. 298) note, locating such activities outside of regular employment debars workers from "fundamental rights such as paid leave, retirement, safety, and most importantly, the right to be paid for one's contribution". Accordingly, workers who are dependent on digital platforms for income generation are among the most precarious (Huws, 2019).

Similar to other platform workers, YouTube creators as cultural workers in the platform economy are not employees as YouTube operates outside of standard employment forms. YouTube provides different types of compensation to its users. Most platform users who consume and produce media content and provide data to the platform are compensated with free access (Fuchs, 2014; Terranova, 2000) and this will be discussed in much more detail later in this chapter. However, those who are in the YouTube Partner Program (YPP) have the opportunity to receive financial compensation for their creative contributions to the platform. To explain, YouTube creators consign their content to the platform in return for advertising revenue share (Kenney and Zysman, 2019, p. 28). In this sense, the YPP functions as a new form of labour contract which gives creators the status of 'partner' instead of 'employee' and thereby frames YouTube content creation as an economic activity built upon self-employment (Caplan and Gillespie, 2020). This strategic framing deprives creators of employment rights protected by law as they are not considered employees (Poell, Nieborg and Duffy, 2022, p. 119). Therefore, they do not have access to social protection like health insurance and minimum wage.

It should also be noted that YouTube's consignment model also allows PHs as new media firms to consign their creative outputs which are produced via a team of media workers to YouTube and monetise them. This further complicates the employment status of YouTube creators. Some creators including some of the research participants have a unique position as formal employees of PHs. Therefore, they are waged labourers and have access to some social protection that individual creators do not have. However, their labour practices are not only governed by PHs but also by the platform since YouTube's policies and algorithmic culture shape the processes of media production and distribution for those working in PHs as well. By acknowledging this unique position of some creators, this study focuses more on shared practices,

concerns, and uncertainties between individual creators and those working in PHs to illuminate how YouTube mediated cultural production create precarious working conditions that are not limited to income or employment insecurity.

Considering all these, for both individual creators and those working in PHs, YouTubing is governed by the platform and more importantly is performed in an algorithmic environment that resembles other types of platform work (Niebler and Kern, 2020, p. 2). To acknowledge these similarities, I frame the labour of YouTube content creators as part of broader labour trends in the platform economy, instead of marginalising it. To understand the operation of platforms specifically for the mediation of creative digital labour though, it is necessary to understand the specificity of platformed cultural production.

Platformed Cultural Production

Creative and cultural work has emerged as one of the key areas contributing to the digital economy. Platform mediated content creation is, therefore, a subset of these emerging work trends, and this research focuses on the production of creative and cultural outputs in the form of YouTube videos. Along with the emergence of new media technologies, YouTube creators are involved in the participatory culture of SMPs that offers "relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations" (Jenkins, 2009, p. xi). With the proliferation of SMPs, cultural production has migrated beyond traditional industrial production modes. In the context of platformed cultural production, not only are the boundaries between conventional media forms blurred but also UGC production has grown rapidly (Lin and de Kloet, 2019, p. 2). This has eventually evolved into what Cunningham and Craig (2019, p. 5) call social media entertainment (SME) – "an emerging proto-industry" – with the formalisation and professionalisation of UGC production.

Looking at the CCIs historically, the emergence of pivotal communication technologies has lowered the barriers of entering the field of cultural production for creators who were formerly not in a position to present their work to an audience (Klinenberg and Benzecry, 2005, p. 10). Digitalisation of media texts, on the one hand, simplify reproduction without quality loss and, on the other hand, make distribution of

products to audiences easier (Bolin, 2016, p. 12). Thanks to the technologies of distribution, an individual user of SMPs is able to operate "on a nearly equal footing with traditional institutional communicators" and gain access to audiences within a highly fragmented mediascape (Napoli, 2010, pp. 509-510).

Nevertheless, SMPs not only act as mere mediators between new media creators, audiences, and advertisers, but also actively engage in regulating the content. Gillespie (2017, p. 255) notes that:

> Social media platforms have increasingly taken on the responsibility of curating the content and policing the activity of their users: not simply to meet legal requirements, or to avoid having additional policies imposed, but also to avoid losing offended or harassed users, to placate advertisers eager to associate their brands with a healthy online community, to protect their corporate image, and to honour their own personal and institutional ethics.

Therefore, such activities of platforms like extensive content moderation through official policies, algorithmic content curation, content banning, and demonetisation emerge as important factors influencing the work of platformed content creators. I will turn to these in Chapter 5 to discuss the role of platform regulations and technical infrastructures in creating precarious working conditions for content creators.

Despite being developed around new media technologies, platform mediated content creation shares similarities with the traditional CCIs that have, even prior to the platformisation of cultural production, been noted for precarious labour (de Peuter, 2014; McRobbie, 2016). Online creative work is similar to CCIs in terms of not only precariousness, especially financial precarity, but also its several key features including blurred work-life boundaries, long hours, flexibility, unstable conditions, temporality, insecurity and individualisation (Cross, 2018; Duffy, 2019; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Luckman and Andrew, 2018; Taylor and Luckman, 2018). Digital content creators engaging in this type of contemporary work also share "an ambition to follow their own values and, even more, to organise their own lives in their own ways" (Taylor and Luckman, 2018, p. 12) by following a "do what you love mantra" (Ashton and Patel, 2018, p. 151; Duffy, 2017).

SMPs reconfigure "the production, distribution, and monetisation of cultural content in staggeringly complex ways" that need to be considered (Duffy, Poell and Nieborg, 2019, p. 1). Platformed cultural production, regardless of its similarities with the traditional CCIs, has therefore idiosyncratic characteristics such as algorithmic structures shaping the work lives of new media workers as cultural producers. These characteristics contributing to the precariousness of content creation become more apparent when the platforms are considered as dynamic sociotechnical infrastructures that endlessly modify their algorithms, interfaces, policies as well as business models (Duffy, Poell and Nieborg, 2019, p. 2). It is, therefore, important to consider how these black-boxed technologies shape the nature of labour on SMPs and thereby emerge as significant actors in the platform economy.

To understand thoroughly the specifics of platformed cultural production, I examine how UGC is integrated into the political economy of SMPs first via monetisation of UGC and providing free access to users, and second by sharing their revenue with users which has resulted in the creation of professionalised and precarious cultural workers in the platform economy.

User-Generated Content in Social Media Platforms

UGC forms the backbone of the platform economy on SMPs which is facilitated by the development of Web 2.0 technologies. After the dot-com crash associated with the global financial crisis in 2001, SMPs built upon the Web 2.0 architectures that generate and control rich user data have restructured the capitalist economy (O'Reilly, 2012). This is partly because SMPs have provided not only new means of communication but also new means for production (Fuchs, 2014). Accordingly, this has resulted in new production practices on the internet which heavily rely on UGC since without content, there would be "no engagement, no users, no data, and no value creation" as pointed out by Kenney and Zysman (2016, p. 27). Production practices on digital media platforms are theorised under different names such as "prosumption" (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Ritzer and Rey, 2013), "digital labour" (Fuchs, 2014; 2015), "audience labour" (Fisher, 2015; Nixon, 2015) and "consumer labour" (Jarrett, 2015; 2016). To highlight the precarious nature of platformed content creation, this study draws from these theoretical concepts because not all content creators are able to monetise their creative outputs or part of their labour remains uncompensated.

One core feature of Web 2.0 or SMPs is the transformation of the terrain of media production and consumption. Ritzer and Rey's (2013) conceptualisation of "prosumption" – the combination of production and consumption – is rather broad but urges us to overcome a modern binary that frames the spheres of production and consumption separately from each other rather than as intermingling processes. Consumers, or prosumers, have long been put to work in various areas such as dining in self-service restaurants and using ATMs; the development of Web 2.0 has created digital prosumers who are actively involved in producing websites' content (Ritzer and Rey, 2013). From a media-centred perspective, Bruns (2008) prefers the term "produsers" – the combination of producers and users – to refer to social media users who actively utilise new productive tools of creating, browsing, and sharing online content provided by SMPs (Beer and Burrows, 2007; Cohen, 2008). Terranova (2000; 2013) frames these user activities producing creative and cultural outputs as digital labour pointing to free cultural and affective labour of users which mostly remains financially uncompensated.

In understanding diverse user practices in SMPs as a form of digital labour, Fuchs' (2014) reference to Marx's labour theory of value provides a useful framework. Fuchs (2014; 2015) theorises digital labour in SMPs as the production of data commodities as a result of the productive consumption activities of users. According to him, the time users spend on these platforms is labour time in which their online activities result in a data commodity that is sold to advertisers by the platform owners to generate economic capital. Hence, the means of communication provided freely by SMPs is also the means of production for creation of value and profits for the companies (Fuchs, 2014, p. 89).

The business model of SMPs typically relies on "two-sided market economics" that incorporates "providing free services financed by monetisation of the audience on the part of the advertisers" (Farchy, 2009, p. 363). SMPs have emerged as digital advertising spaces owing to their technical infrastructures through which they extract extensive user data and create ad targeting user profiles (Chan-Olmsted and Wang, 2019, p. 135). It is here worth noting that UGC not only refers to audience data but also creative content. Within the digital architecture of SMPs, the success of creative content in attracting enormous attention and audience engagement which then generates audience data used in targeted advertising contributed to the development of

this two-sided business model. A great amount of UGC, however, remains uncompensated or compensated only in the form of free service (Kenney and Zysman, 2019, p. 32). Such free access should not be glorified, as Na (2015) argues that it is an ideology masking exploitation of users.

Terranova (2000), on the other hand, argues that free labour of users does not necessarily mean exploited labour as users gain pleasure from their online activities and community building practices. As Fuchs (2014, p. 116) mentions, "labour time on commercial social media is the conversion of Bourdieusian social, cultural and symbolic capital into Marxian value and economic capital". Online user activities, therefore, generate not only economic value for companies that commodify user data but also produce affects (Arvidsson and Colleoni, 2012; Heaton and Proulx, 2015) and different forms of social and cultural values (Grünewald and Haupt, 2014). In other words, users might obtain affective, social, or cultural capital despite the lack of financial compensation (Raun, 2018, p. 107). By acknowledging the persistence of users' inalienable affective relations, expression of selves and cultural products, Jarrett (2015, p. 207) uses a Marxist feminist lens to overcome "a series of binaries: productive/unproductive, alienation/agency, economy/culture" which emerged from the literature on digital labour. Digital labour is rather "a hybrid activity that may be exploited, alienating work at the same time as it is agential and socially meaningful" (Jarrett, 2016, pp. 77-78). A more holistic and non-binary approach to value creation activities on digital platforms provides a useful lens for this research to analyse the precarious work of YouTube creators as shaped by not only economic but also political and cultural factors.

The literature on UGC and data in digital platforms discussed so far is shaped by a political economy perspective. Thus, the focus of these studies is neither on specific platforms or labour practices of media production nor on any particular national context. Rather, they explore more generalised dynamics of digital labour. At this point then, it is necessary to shift the focus from the production of data commodity to the production of digital content as a result of mostly creative, cognitive, affective, and communicative processes. This form of creative digital labour which still produces UGC is not necessarily free labour as content creators have a chance to monetise their creative outputs.

Monetising User-Generated Content

Earlier discussions of UGC focusing on audiences or users as agents of media producers were less interested in the production and distribution of creative and cultural content in SMPs but on the data that can be extracted from their activity. However, SMPs then started to share their ad revenue with creators by integrating economic affordances into platform architectures, which in turn paved the way for the industrialisation and professionalisation of online content creation into SME. As a result, new creative and cultural labourers who build a media career and make a living by creating and monetising social media content have emerged. While platforms serve their own commercial interests, creators have also started to use such sociotechnical and commercial affordances of these platforms to attract audiences and build communities for their own interests (Cunningham and Craig, 2019, p. 35). Kenney and Zysman (2019, pp. 27-28) define content creators as "individuals or firms that use Internet platforms, on which they consign their digital creations in the hope of monetizing them". These creators have been addressed with different names: internet micro-celebrities who garner popularity through online performance (Senft, 2008, p. 25); social media celebrities who acquire fame via "entrepreneurial calculation" which is inclusive of the affordances and business model of the platforms, advertisers as well as commercial cultural intermediaries (Hou, 2019, p. 534); influencers who are contemporary internet celebrities who have developed an established social media career (Abidin, 2017, p. 1); or social media creators, "commercializing and professionalizing native social media users" who monetise their creative media outputs (Cunningham and Craig, 2019, p. 70). There are also names for platform specific creators such as YouTubers, Instagrammers, and TikTokers or for the type of media they create such as (live)streamers, vloggers, and bloggers.

While there is a growing body of literature on individual creators, little has been written about firms or media companies as content creators. The rise of SMPs has also transformed CCIs as they have given rise to new forms of creative businesses within the established media industries (Flew, 2017, p. 517). As the SME industry has grown, production houses (PHs) as new generation media companies that mimic the organisational structure of companies in traditional CCIs have emerged. These PHs monetise digital content produced by a team of media workers in the same way as individual creators monetise their own contributions. In order to develop a full

understanding of this work, this study, therefore, includes media workers who are employed by or are part of PHs as well as entrepreneurs who form independent PHs. Their integration into this research contributes to the literature as their experiences reveal significant aspects of this work which have been neglected in the dominant literature such as the division of labour of YouTube media production and its effect on how creators form their professional identities.

One of the earliest examples of this new economic activity was blogging through which internet users became produsers (Bruns and Jacobs, 2006). Hopkins (2019, p. 1) explains this economic activity by pointing out that bloggers have begun to translate the attention of the site's visitors into income by selling advertising space. Starting from the very early stages though, bloggers have not only generated income from advertising but also from donations (Quiggin, 2006, p. 75). These income streams, however, have not been sustainable since bloggers have worked on the basis of temporary contracts or agreements without fixed pay rates as mentioned by Mäkinen (2018, p. 130). Therefore, their work has required constant negotiation for every deal they make with advertisers as well as keeping the attention of their site's visitors. Video blogging (vlogging) on YouTube later emerged as a new type of career built around performances of authenticity, collaboration and interacting with audiences (Ashton and Patel, 2018). YouTube creators started to monetise their creative outputs after the platform launched its Partner Program for ad revenue sharing in 2007. In addition to this, creators also started to make money through product placements, including affiliated links in video descriptions or directly producing advertising videos for brands (Gerhards, 2017). This market comprised of SMPs, advertisers and creators has widened with the rise of influencers on other platforms such as Instagram (van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021) or TikTok (Abidin, 2020).

Given the dynamic nature of platforms and ongoing market shifts, creators "have to develop new ways to generate revenue in an environment in which they often find themselves in a subordinated position" (Nieborg and Poell, 2018, p. 4283). Cunningham and Craig (2019, p. 265) outline the diverse revenue streams of creators in this way:

> Creators foster both traditional and innovative revenue streams. They harness the commercial platform features and user affordances available on and across

> multiple platforms through programmatic advertising and influencer marketing, in concert with traditional media through performance fees and generation of IP, as well as through ancillary platforms that offer fan funding and merchandise.

In addition to these, there are also other ways in which content creators generate revenue which are more common in Chinese SME. For instance, one source of revenue has formed around fans' practices of sending virtual gifts or online tips, which could be converted into cash, to their favourite creators especially in the case of live-streaming (Craig, Lin and Cunningham, 2021, p. 121; Lin and de Kloet, 2019, p. 5). While this diversity points out the precarious position of creators, diversifying income streams also emerges as a risk management strategy to minimise financial hardship. Additionally, operating across multiple platforms to engage with audiences and to cross-promote brands also becomes a necessity for successful monetisation (Cunningham and Craig, 2019, p. 63). Acknowledging this diversity, this study specifically focuses on creators whose main platform is YouTube.

YouTube as a Hybrid Commercial Platform

YouTube is one of the digital platforms where the dynamics of platformed content creation can be traced. Since it was created as a video sharing website in 2005 by three former PayPal employees, it has succeeded in attracting a large amount of attention, which can be demonstrated by its user statistics. The 'YouTube for Press' page indicates that the platform has over two billion users each month and also one billion hours of watching time daily with billions of video views (YouTube, n.d.-i).

In its 16 years of existence, a growing body of literature has conceptualised YouTube in various ways. Early research has seen YouTube as database (Lovink, 2008), archive (Kessler and Schäfer, 2009; Prelinger, 2009) or as "cultural reservoir" (Richard, 2008). These conceptualisations might fit well with YouTube's initial tagline 'Your Digital Video Repository', which simply framed the platform as a place to store videos. Some scholars, furthermore, oppose these characterizations by taking YouTube as a medium and comparing it with the medium of TV. For instance, Uricchio (2009, p. 37) frames YouTube as "a transitional model to next generation television", and Grusin (2009, p. 61) frames YouTube as a medium which remediates TV. YouTube's remediation of

TV makes sense in one respect as the platform imitates certain features of TV (Snickars and Vonderau, 2009, p. 15) such as its live streaming option announced in 2011 and the launch of YouTube TV in 2017 (YouTube, 2011; 2017b). Furthermore, the platform could be seen as an "open access distributor" of homemade video that affords tools to not only the legacy media industry but also amateurs by lowering the barriers to entry into media production (Lotz, 2018, p. 150). These medium-specific aspects are only some of the technical affordances of the platform, and YouTube is more than the sum of its some technical features. The diverse ways these technical affordances are formed by the platform and utilised by content creators situate YouTube into much wider economic, social, cultural as well as political frameworks. Studying YouTube content production, therefore, necessitates a much broader approach than examining the platform's affordances. From this point of view, this research characterises YouTube as "a hybrid commercial environment" in which UGC production is integrated into different kinds of monetisation (Arthurs, Drakopoulou and Gandini, 2018, p. 7; Lobato, 2016b, p. 349).

Soon after its launch, YouTube marketed itself as a site where you 'Broadcast Yourself™' by dropping the 'Your Digital Video Repository' tagline. The nature of the platform can be better examined through this 'Broadcast Yourself™' motto which indicates the shift in agency by pointing out active user involvement via broadcasting or "homecasting" (van Dijck, 2013b, p. 148). As Burgess and Green (2018, p. 48) argue, YouTube's value comes not only from distributing traditional media content but also from UGC native to the platform as well as emergent user practices of engaging, sharing, and curating such content. The emergence of a vernacular creative culture via UGC also attracted academic attention and resulted in mostly content-based research within the YouTube literature.

First of all, the platform functions "as a domain of self-expression" (Strangelove, 2010, p. 4). Users create and distribute "personally expressive media" referring to "any mediated artefact or set of media that enables a creator to communicate aspects of the self" (Lange, 2014, p. 16). Studies focusing on home dancing videos as a way of self-constitution (Peters and Seier, 2009), Iraq war videos which marks a historic moment via testimonials of the living (Christensen, 2009), and educational videos of transgender people (Miller, 2017) are some examples. There is also other research which specifically looks at women's participation on YouTube via analysing a

particular genre of beauty and lifestyle vlogs in relation to the construction of post-feminist self. For example, post-feminist self-branding practices of women are scrutinised through amateur girls' dancing or singing videos (Banet-Weiser, 2011) and pinup hair tutorials of beauty vloggers (Bevan, 2017). Furthermore, contemporary cultural production on SMPs is not only explored as an individualistic self-expression but also as a more collaborative and co-creative process (Hutchinson, 2017, p. 2). Online popular culture of video memes, remixes and parodies has, therefore, emerged as a result of such collaborative practices of users on YouTube. Burgess (2008, p. 103) explored these new forms of vernacular creativity by looking at popular examples such as 'Chocolate Rain' and 'Guitar' and emphasised how these forms inspired participatory culture via creative engagement among the platform users.

As a result of distributing media content and having access to audiences, YouTube also creates a mediated space where people socially interact through videos (Lange, 2019, p. 4). Thus, users' participation on YouTube can be linked to social aims as the platform allows media sharing, liking, and commenting. Based on her ethnographic study with young adults in the U.S., Lange (2008b) focuses on the social networking dimensions of YouTube. She argues that online video sharing practices help people to construct new social ties and/or to maintain their existing relationships. Burgess and Green (2009b, p. 29) also acknowledge that people exchanging online media have an intention to build social networks in addition to "self-promotion" through broadcasting themselves. Through such interactions, the platform users may even form an "imagined community of people who share an interest in video making or communicating through interactive video" (Lange, 2008a, p. 88). Confirming Jarrett's (2015; 2016) argument, these studies demonstrate that people can generate "inalienable use-values" through establishing social relations on digital platforms that cannot be reduced to only economic value.

Moreover, users' participation on YouTube can be political since online video enables new forms of representing political identities and/or ideas. Production of political memes in a humorous way (da Silva and Garcia, 2012) or identity politics of transgender people (Raun, 2018) are examples of such new forms. In this sense, YouTube videos create a political moment through which what is invisible can be made visible (Hediger, 2009). As an example, Way's (2015) research on anti-government pop videos by Turkish users in the aftermath of 2013 protest events

against the government in Turkey demonstrates how YouTube can be a site for political discussions when the mainstream media is controlled and manipulated by the government.

Lastly, YouTube is an economic space wherein both the platform owners and creators generate revenue. This is because cultural intermediation functions "as a capital translator within the cultural production field" of YouTube (Hutchinson, 2017, p. 4). To clarify, multiple forms of user practices which generate different types of values such as cultural, social, political, and symbolic capital are eventually transformed into economic capital within the platform economy of YouTube. This makes the participatory culture the core business of YouTube (Burgess and Green, 2018, p. 12). The platform, though, has always been driven by economic interests. The trademark symbol in its slogan, for instance, "identifies its location within regimes of property rights, copyright ownership and commercial interests" (Jarrett, 2008, p. 135). Google's purchase of YouTube for $1.65 billion in 2006 was a surprising entrepreneurial move given that the platform was not proven to be profitable at the time of purchase; this is also an early indication of the platform's economic significance. As a company generating its revenue from advertising, Google's adoption of YouTube was a strategic move to include online video into its advertising space (McDonald, 2009, p. 388). Subsequently, the company has adapted its business model to YouTube with the integration of strategic advertising programs such as AdWords and AdSense. On the one hand, with these programs, YouTube sells marketers access to particular users based on location, age, interests and more specific keywords derived from user data inputs. On the other hand, content creators have been afforded the capacity to display ads on their content and thereby have gained access to monetisation (Wasko and Erickson, 2009, p. 375). Monetising vast amount of UGC on the platform and ensuring the continuity of ad revenues is dependent on "selling eyeballs to advertisers" like in other SMPs (van Es, 2020, p. 225). Accordingly, attracting more eyeballs to the platform and keeping them on the platform to watch more videos and thereby more ads has become an important part of YouTube's attention economy. To that end, YouTube employs automated systems such as search and recommendation algorithms that match the viewers with the most relevant content for their search and interests. These algorithmic management tools play a significant part in shaping the working conditions of the research participants that will be elaborated in Chapter 5.

YouTube also allowed its users to monetise their creative inputs at an early stage. Late in 2007, the platform declared its YouTube Partner Program (YPP) which allowed creators to receive a share from the company's ad revenue. Caplan and Gillespie (2020, p. 8) define the YPP as "a labour contract in a new form, governing an enormous variety of creative work". When it was first launched, only a select number of creators in the USA were invited to join the programme. In time, YouTube lowered the barriers by expanding the programme to include more creators in multiple countries. I detail these changes in the YPP and their significance regarding the professionalisation of YouTube content creation in Chapter 4. However, in 2017, this inclusive policy was changed in the aftermath of the 'adpocalypse' in which new rules governing monetisation cut off revenue streams for many YouTube creators. I talk more about how the introduction of new criteria for the YPP relates to precarity in Chapter 5. Along with these developments, the nature of YouTube has evolved more to serve economic, or profit-seeking aims for both the platform owners and its users, while also keeping all its other features such as being a space for vernacular creativity and participatory culture. Accordingly, the 'Broadcast Yourself™' tagline was dropped in 2010 as the platform underwent another transformation from broadcasting oneself to "signing up with an agent" as a by-product of monetisation practices. This "reminds us that disruptive technologies bring not only new production cultures and audience experiences but also the inevitable possibilities for commercial intermediation in the messy middle" (Lobato, 2016b, p. 358). Content creators sign up with these commercial intermediaries which make advertisement deals with companies in order to increase creators' and hence YouTube's monetary gain.

To sum up, the participatory culture of YouTube makes the platform a cultural, social as well as political space. The YouTube literature that analysed various forms of user practices by looking at the creative outputs of users is valuable in term of demonstrating these aspects of the platform. Such analysis, however, obscures digital labour practices behind the production of those videos. The participants of this research also create various types of content ranging from daily vlogs to challenge and adventure videos for entertainment purposes, self-expressive videos on their political views, lifestyle choices and beauty tips, reactions to films and TV shows, and tutorials sharing their knowledge with others. This study, however, is more interested in *how* they produce rather than *what* they produce. Regardless of the type of content they

create, YouTube creators put a significant amount of time and energy into the production, distribution, and promotion of their videos, which necessitates performing various types of labour. This study, therefore, locates the research subjects as specific kinds of users who generate or aspire to earn income from YouTubing. To understand how YouTube creators translate their accumulated social, cultural, and political capital into economic one requires looking behind the scenes. It is, therefore, necessary to think of these practices in relation to digital labour. However, this is not a way to reduce all user activities to the generation of economic value but to highlight this particular dimension of the platform.

YouTube is, therefore, a hybrid commercial platform which affords its users the capacity to produce and distribute creative and cultural outputs, form social capital through networking, express themselves as well as generate economic capital via commodifying audiences. Conceptualising YouTube in this way is important in the context of this research as it allows for studying the labour of content creators as an economic activity producing entertainment culture not only globally but also locally. This is because YouTube affords global circulation and reception of media content but the production of such content which creates cultural, social, and political value to the platform and creators is very much dependent on local contexts of production. Acknowledging this hybrid nature also affords a lens through which we can see that YouTube content creation is not only governed by economic practices driven by the company's profit-seeking aims but also political practices considering the platform's compliance with local regulations in different countries and cultural practices regarding audience – creator relations.

Labour of YouTube Creators

Considering that this study is interested in the creative digital labour practices of YouTube creators, it is important to examine more closely what has been written about the specific labour practices. YouTube creators who enter into professional and commercial relations with the platform put in long hours to perform various kinds of labour not all of which may return economic gains (Raun, 2018, p. 100). This is because the YouTube algorithm favours popular content and thereby already-popular channels are more rewarded economically as they receive more new views due to their increased visibility (Bärtl, 2018, p. 30). Creators, however, continue to produce new

content with different motivations which include developing future career opportunities, although most of them make little money to live on, and perform various forms of immaterial labour to remain visible or attain visibility within competitive digital environment (Duffy, 2017; 2019). For theorising the work culture of social media creators in relation to labour, scholars have multiple conceptual frameworks including networked labour (Soha and McDowell, 2016), prosumption labour (Charitsis, 2016), playbour (Kücklich, 2005), affective labour (Balance, 2012; Berryman and Kavka, 2018; Raun, 2018), aspirational labour (Duffy, 2016; 2017), entrepreneurial labour (Neff, Wissinger and Zukin, 2005), hope labour (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013), algorithmic labour (Bishop, 2018a), visibility labour (Abidin, 2016), and relational labour (Baym, 2015). I will go through how these different forms of labour are addressed in the literature as this study benefits from how they frame the labour practices of social media creators.

Since YouTube creators as new media workers have nonstandard employment relations with the platform, they engage in a form of entrepreneurial labour. To build a media career requires entrepreneurial investment in skills and equipment which individualises the responsibility for creators' working conditions and the risk of failure (Neff, Wissinger and Zukin, 2005). In the SME industry, individuals who desire to create their own channels streaming attention-grabbing creative content and translating their intimate relations with fanbase into economic gain throw themselves into this type of digital media entrepreneurialism (Sujoko and Fatanti, 2017; Weare, 2016; Zhang and de Seta, 2019). The rise of entrepreneurial creators has accelerated the formalisation of platformed content creation by blurring the boundary between amateur and professional (Burgess and Green, 2009a). However, the creative and commercial endeavours of individuals do not always generate a liveable income. Therefore, for some creators, YouTubing is undertaken as aspirational labour which is "a mode of (mostly) uncompensated, independent work that is propelled by the much-venerated ideal of *getting paid to do what you love*" (Duffy, 2017, p. 4, original emphasis). In her work on fashion and beauty vloggers, Duffy (2015) argues that this type of labour coexists with emotional as well as economic investment in the hope for developing a future career. Both media aspirants and entrepreneurs thus attach the emotion of hope to their creative practices, which brings us to another term: hope labour "as un- or under-compensated work carried out in the present, often for

experience or exposure" in the hope for future monetisation opportunities (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013, p. 21). As Ahmed (2014, p. 184) argues "hope involves a relationship to the present" and thereby requires subjects to act in the present to shape the future. In this regard, creators act in the present to develop their media production skills and acquire new ones in order to develop a media career inside YouTube or to move to more established media sectors.

The entertainment and cultural industries centre on "the creation and manipulation of affects", which also necessities the performance of affective labour of human interaction as one component of immaterial labour (Hardt, 1999, p. 95). Likewise, "intensifying affective states and building affective connections is the essence of work we do when using social media, which in turn places affect at the core of the digital economy" (Jarrett, 2016, p. 117). In this sense, performing affective labour can serve for the creation of a sense of community as shown in Balance's (2012) study of Asian American YouTube creators who experience racism in their daily lives. Through strategic recreation of banal racist moments in forms such as remixes and parodies, Asian American creators give rise to a particular set of shared affects with their audiences, which then creates a sense of connectedness. In addition to the role of positive affects to create a sense of community, Berryman and Kavka (2018, p. 87) argue that intimate relations can also be established through negative affective labour as in the case of vlogs displaying "anxiety, distress and the performance of emotional vulnerability". Furthermore, creators capitalise on their intimate relations with audiences formed via affective investment for monetary gain (Raun, 2018). Hence, the commercialisation of creator – audience relations cannot be overlooked since this has a significant role in the labour process of YouTubing.

The industrialisation of social media usage has resulted in the transformation of both the concept of platform and the character of community (Snickars and Vonderau, 2009, p. 10). Part of the industry logic is that it is advertising funded which means that audience relations are as central as they are in the mainstream media. Developing a large audience base is, therefore, significant for YouTube creators to generate income. This is because they commodify their audiences by placing products into their content and delivering advertising messages to their audiences in more authentic and organic ways (Duffy, 2019, p. 378). Thus, the labour of YouTube creators consists of not only media production but also community development as they need to invest time and

energy to engage with their audiences and maintain long-term sustainable relations with them (Cunningham and Craig, 2019, pp. 91-93; Duffy, 2019, p. 380). This "regular, ongoing communication with audiences over time to build social relationships that foster paid work" is what Baym (2015, p. 16) calls "relational labour".

These relations as part of the political economy of YouTube life are, however, managed differently to those of conventional media. Creators interact with their subscribers and audiences across different social media platforms and participate in meetups. They also utilise certain strategies in the videos such as using generalised terms to address audiences (i.e., *you*, *you guys*, or *friends/arkadaşlar* in the Turkish context) and using gestures in a creative way (i.e., pointing down when asking the audience to comment below) to ensure active involvement of their audiences and to keep their attention alive on their channels (Frobenius, 2014). At the end of the videos, they also often demonstrate their appreciation to audiences who spare time to watch their videos (Lange, 2019, p. 113). All these function as a method of signalling their expertise as YouTube creators (Ashton and Patel, 2018, p. 161). Morreale's (2014, p. 118) study of *Annoying Orange* channel on YouTube is a good example of the significance of performing relational labour in terms of creating a brand from the channel. Social capital generated via productive involvement of the audience community which distributed parodies and mashups of *Annoying Orange* across multiple SMPs was successfully converted into economic capital. Hence, for YouTube creators, relational labour is a significant part of their labour process that enables them to build a community out of their audiences and eventually to translate this into economic capital.

However, audience – creator interactions sometimes go wrong and result in negative outcomes such as creation of a hostile environment through hateful comments. For example, Wotanis and McMillan's (2014, p. 920) study demonstrates how gender matters in this case as female creators receive more hostile comments including "hater remarks and inappropriate sexual comments" than male creators. To overcome this situation, female creators may develop some strategies such as ironically engaging implicit or explicit gender performances to criticise traditional gender roles (Wotanis and McMillan, 2014). Despite these hateful comments, it should be noted creators also distinguish hateful comments from constructive criticism, and mostly do not want

regulatory mechanisms to eliminate hateful comments because of protecting free speech and accessing constructive criticisms (Lange, 2008b). Moreover, a flagging system has been introduced by the platform which allows government agencies, non-governmental organisations, advertisers, and users to flag any video that violates the YouTube Community Guidelines. This may function as a way of community policing and sometimes leads to the exclusion of certain types of content. As an example, Kampman (2008) discusses how YouTube's flagging system is misused against the LGBT community and has functioned as a mechanism of censorship.

Overall, these studies foreground how the relations between audience and creators shape the cultural products, and how the demands of fans might place certain constraints on creators. Handling such a hostile environment which requires emotional management and developing certain strategies, on the one hand, can be seen as part of creators' labour process. Considering the centrality of audience development for generating income in the political economy of SME, this issue should also be examined in relation to precarity. While the existing research explores the significance of gender and sexual identities, there is a need to consider national, political as well as religious identities in shaping audience – creator relations and thereby the cultural products. To that end, this study scrutinises these relations as located in wider geographical cultures of nation states, identifying how they emerge as factors in precarity especially for creators who are bound to local audiences due to language constraints.

Lastly, in addition to various forms of immaterial labour that produce aspirations, hope, affect, and relations discussed so far, it is also important not to undermine the additional labour that is required to produce and distribute online content (Ashton and Patel, 2018). Creators' efforts in finding an idea, conducting research, writing a script, filming, editing videos, and designing thumbnails should be acknowledged. In addition to these, "the act of posting a video is constituted from a series of sub-tasks that are in turn comprised of many micro technical decisions and social interactions" (Lange, 2014, p. 26). All these decisions are important as they will eventually affect the videos' visibility in the algorithmic culture of the platform. Even their labour process does not cease after uploading the video content. YouTube creators also allocate time and energy to promote their digital work across different platforms (Duffy, 2019). It is, therefore, important to pay attention to these aspects of YouTuber

labour and this has been incorporated into the research design of this project. This approach has helped me to highlight several strategies creators use to cope with precarity. Also, focusing on these aspects revealed the division of labour in the processes of media production taking place in the PHs, which then foregrounded how being a content creator in the PHs affected the research participants' formation of professional identities and the way they imagine their future or career.

Media Intermediaries in SME: Multi-Channel Networks

A final point to note is the growth of larger scale production houses in the creative labour dynamics of YouTube. The ways YouTube creators perform various forms of labour and manage their audiences suggest dimensions of professionalisation emerging in the YouTube community. This trajectory is made more apparent when the rise of multi-channel networks (MCNs) is considered. In the aftermath of YPP in 2007, MCNs as new media intermediaries have formed a new business model by aggregating YouTube channels. These entities have been actively formed and defined by Google, rather than emerging organically, as part of the formalisation of the SME industry (Lobato, 2016b, p. 352). They have contributed to YouTube's construction as a marketplace by providing assistance to creators in areas such as digital rights management, advertising, data analysis and technical support for production of videos in order to professionalise the field of UGC (Cunningham, Craig and Silver, 2016; Gardner and Lehnert, 2016; Lobato, 2016b; Vonderau, 2016b). As MCNs are one of the key agents in YouTube's creator economy, this research investigates the pitfalls and benefits of this new business of media intermediation for both MCNs and creators in relation to precarity.

The business model of MCNs is built upon affiliating with YouTube creators, selling ads by using YouTube's content monetisation affordances, cross-promoting YouTube channels included in their network, and branding popular creators (Lobato, 2016b, p. 349). In return for these services, MCNs take a share from creators' revenue, and the rate of this share may vary depending on the agreement between a creator and an MCN (Gardner and Lehnert, 2016, p. 296). The role of MCNs for YouTube is not only to help the platform with managing the rapidly growing field of UGC but also to make the platform more advertiser-friendly by improving the content quality and reducing copyright infringements (Cunningham, Craig and Silver, 2016, p. 382; Lobato, 2016b,

p. 351). For digital content creators, affiliating with MCNs is among the ways of achieving high level of exposure to gain popularity and increase income (Hutchinson, 2017, p. 194). Creators might also benefit from MCNs by collaborating with other network members to maximise revenue (Koch *et al.*, 2018).

This seemingly rewarding model of media intermediation, however, does not necessarily empower all YouTube creators. On the one hand, MCNs increase creators' opportunities in the processes of not only economic but also social and cultural value creation within the YouTube's creator economy (Grünewald and Haupt, 2014). On the other hand, despite their promises, MCNs are criticised by many creators who are unsatisfied with the support of MCNs as these organisations favour top level creators when securing brand deals (Gardner and Lehnert, 2016). This study, therefore, pays attention to why creators who became affiliated with MCNs with an aspiration for growing their channels later preferred disintermediation and why some creators did not opt for signing with MCNs at all. Moreover, there is an alternative to these two decisions. While this business model does not serve the need of some creators, other creators mimic the same model through commercialising their social relations and building a small network of creators. How creators use this model as a way of risk management to combat financial precarity is another concern of this study.

This new screen ecology, however, is precarious for not only creators but also MCNs whose success depends on maintaining continual and productive relationships with creators. It is precarious for MCNs because they may lose their creators when those who grow in agency by securing a large fanbase make new deals with traditional media companies or other MCNs, or prefer self-management (Cunningham, Craig and Silver, 2016, p. 385). Also, dissatisfaction with MCNs' pricey services which are not profitable for creators is another reason for "creator flight" leading to precarity for both creators and MCNs (Craig, 2019, p. 368). In addition to these concerns, little attention has been paid to geographical factors such as regulations at the national level affecting the operation of MCNs. Thus, this study takes the national contexts into consideration to contribute to the discussions of industrial precarity MCNs might face.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that YouTubing as a contemporary media career is not an outlier but part of broader work and labour trends in the platform economy. Similar to other platform workers, YouTube creators form nonstandard commercial relations with the platform and their media production practices are very much shaped by algorithmic management tools. YouTubing as a form of platformed cultural production also resembles the CCIs in terms of the organisation of work that requires flexibility, affective attachment to one's job, individualisation and long working hours but also has unique characteristics stemming from the algorithmic turn in media production as well as the dynamic infrastructures of SMPs resulting in constantly changing work environment. This chapter has also examined UGC as the pillar of platformed content creation since the integration of the platform logic into the social web to monetise a vast amount of UGC has generated income not only for the platform owners but also for content creators. Furthermore, the industrialisation of platform mediated content creation into SME has paved the way for the emergence of the labour force of precarious cultural workers. This study, though, is particularly interested in YouTube creators who operate within the hybrid commercial nature of the platform. While some research participants have successfully translated their social and cultural capital into economic one, some of them only enjoy the non-monetary benefits of online video sharing. All, however, engage in commercial relations with the platform and perform various forms of labour.

The existing literature on YouTube mostly focuses on creators as independent, autonomous, and self-employed agents. However, as the SME industry developed over time, YouTube production has changed with the integration of PHs which employ a number of media workers who have a specific role in the division of labour of media production. This research, therefore, focuses on not only individual creators but also those who engage in YouTubing in PHs in order to understand how their experiences shape the way they form their professional identities. It also focuses on how YouTube creators as new media workers in platformed content creation constitute their professional identities while trying to develop or maintain their media career.

Second, the chapter noted the precarious nature of platformed content creation and highlighted the importance of examining the ways in which the dynamic nature of

platforms makes the media work of YouTube creators precarious. In addition to the dynamics of platformisation, there are other dimensions that significantly affect the labour practices of YouTube creators such as the local contexts of media production. The existing literature mostly leaves out how YouTube content creation is localised and how economic, political, cultural, and linguistic aspects of localisation ultimately contribute to the precarious nature of creators' work. In order to address this gap in the research, this study takes YouTube creators as creative agents located in specific national contexts. Accordingly, this study asks the following research questions (RQs):

> RQ1: How do YouTube creators describe their media production practices and form their professional identities inside or outside YouTube careers?
>
> RQ2: How do the dynamics of platformed content creation create precarious working conditions for YouTube creators?
>
> RQ3: How do the different economic, political, cultural, social, and linguistic contexts of Ireland and Turkey inform how YouTube creators experience precarity?

The next chapter focuses on how this research is carried out by providing a rationale for the selection of research approach and methods as well as outlining the processes of data collection and analysis.

Chapter 3

Researching Platformed Content Creation

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of my methodological approach to designing and conducting this research as well as analysing the collected data. I begin by explaining why I chose a qualitative research approach to design this study. Then, in order to research platformed content generation, I look at three alternative methodological approaches: First, I provide an overview of political economy approaches as they are used in this study to place YouTubers' creative digital labour practices within a wider framework of platform economies, and then I highlight why this approach is not, on its own, appropriate for this study. Second, drawing on the existing research on YouTube, I highlight the limitations of textual analysis when treating a text on YouTube as a discrete form such as videos or written audience comments. Instead, I suggest framing YouTube as a multimodal text because the platform with its affordances and regulatory frameworks is part of the labour process of YouTubing. Then, I describe how the walkthrough method was used to identify the textual multimodality of the platform which informs my discussion of platformed creative labour. Third, I discuss the importance of ethnographic frameworks in designing this study, which provided methods such as semi-structured interviews and observations to be able to access creators' own realities regarding their work lives. Following that, the chapter goes into data collection and data analysis processes.

Selecting a Qualitative Research Approach

Creswell (2014, p. 3) defines research approaches as the "plans and the procedures for research that span the steps from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation". Based on Creswell's account, it is important to specify selection of this study's research approach as a threshold matter since the selected approach influences subsequent steps including research design, research methods and data analysis. To explore the labour practices of YouTube creators in relation to their localised experiences in Ireland and Turkey, this research adopted a qualitative approach rather than a quantitative one.

A quantitative research approach is designed "for testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables" based on either experimental or non-experimental (i.e., survey) designs (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). It has a normative belief about the possibility of discovering objective facts by controlling variables and utilising optimal research techniques (Holliday, 2007, pp. 5-6). Its limitations also stem from "modernist assumptions of an objective reality" (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2018, p. 137). Quantitative research approaches have been used in the study of YouTube to produce an understanding of new media genres distributed on YouTube and their viewership (Bärtl, 2018); to figure out how YouTube's recommendation algorithms work (Kaiser and Rauchfleisch, 2020); to track misinformation through quantitative content analysis (Donzelli *et al.*, 2018); or to understand how YouTube videos affect young people's opinion formation on socio-political issues (Zimmermann *et al.*, 2020). However, the use of quantitative approaches does not allow for the "multiple subjective, relative truths of personal construction" that I seek to uncover (Frost and Elichaoff, 2014, p. 43). Quantitative approaches exploring creative digital labour on YouTube would, therefore, undervalue the multiple realities YouTube creators construct via their personal experiences situated in different national contexts, and oversimplify such multiple realities into an assumed objective reality.

A qualitative research approach, on the other hand, stands against such a positivist paradigm by investigating social variables as being uncontrollable, valuing dynamic structures of social realities instead of reducing such multiplicities into certain objective facts that are out there waiting to be discovered (Holliday, 2007, p. 5). As its chief interest is in "the meaning-making, sense-making, attributional activities that shape action (or inaction)", it values the construction of reality rather than merely a representation of reality (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2018, p. 113). Following such social constructivist epistemology, this study does not distinguish the practices of YouTube creators based on their correspondence to objective facts. Rather, this study adopts a qualitative approach because it aims to discover diverse creative digital labour practices of YouTube creators as platformed media workers, their associated realities with their practices of YouTubing as well as their localised experiences in particular national contexts by valuing their own accounts. More specifically, this study seeks to uncover how creators form fluid professional identities as fundamental elements of their subjective realities (Berger and Luckmann, 1991, p. 194), how they make sense

of YouTubing in relation to the platform regulations, algorithms, and entertainment trends, what meanings they attribute to their relations with audiences, and how they interpret all these within their local production contexts.

Methodological Issues in Researching Cultural Producers

Davis (2008, p. 53) categorises researching cultural producers into three remits including political economy, textual analysis, and sociological and ethnographic work.[1] Applying these methodological approaches to the case of platformed content creation or to a single platform such as YouTube would produce different results since they value different types of knowledge. Each methodological framework has its benefits as well as its limitations for studying the creative digital labour of YouTube creators. For instance, political economy approaches favour a bird's-eye view of digital platforms by incorporating political and economic aspects that shape cultural production; however, they obscure particular experiences of content creators as they do not ground their findings on producers' own accounts. Textual analysis is inclined to approach a text on YouTube as a discrete form such as videos or written audience comments, which often limits the analysis to the self-representation practices of content creators or audience reception.

This research has nevertheless incorporated what is useful from each framework. That is, it used mixed methods to study platformed content production on YouTube with both individual content creators and other creators who work in complicated workplace environments such as PHs. First, it employed methods from ethnographic frameworks such as semi-structured interviews and observation to elucidate media production and distribution dynamics of Irish and Turkish YouTube creators based on their own accounts and localised experiences. These methods, moreover, were reinforced with multimodal textual analysis to inform the discussion of creative digital labour considering the platform affordances and regulatory frameworks. I will hereafter discuss how each approach addresses digital labour and/or practices on YouTube, as well as how these were incorporated into the aims of this research.

[1] Davis (2008) names the third remit as "sociological/ethnographic work". Since the use of '/' might be misleading as it suggests using sociological and ethnographic research interchangeably despite their differences, I preferred to remove '/' and use 'and' instead.

Political Economy

Political economy emerges as a methodological framework which deploys a variety of methods for researching media production. Although there are different types of political economies of media depending on their theoretical roots, their common ground is to locate media industries into the wider socio-economic context which is shaped by capitalist economies (Winseck, 2011, p. 4). In other words, political economy aims to "link cultural outputs to the economic, industrial and political factors that shape the organisations and industries which then produce culture" (Davis, 2008, p. 53). Political economy studies of media industries more specifically look at how power relations operate in those industries by taking the roles of decision-makers and profit-owners who have benefited from such decisions into consideration (Wasko and Erickson, 2009, p. 373). Their focus, however, remains at the macro level as they draw their analysis on the gathered data such as "simple financial data sets, industry surveys and reports, policy and legislative documents or historical archives" (Davis, 2008, p. 54). Since this study centres on platformed cultural production on YouTube, it benefits from knowledge produced by studies using political economy approaches in order to locate creative and productive practices of YouTube creators into a broader framework. It is, therefore, useful to mention briefly this framework, and its drawbacks for undertaking this research.

Political economy approaches are common in the study of digital labour in media studies. Using Marxist theory to develop new conceptual tools for discussing and understanding labour in digital platforms is especially prevalent. A Marxist political economy approach to platformed content creation provides a way to comprehend labour and value creation practices in relation to alienation and exploitation in digital media industries and specifically on SMPs. Studies using this approach, therefore, usually ask their research questions about forms and conditions of labour in digital platforms, modes of exploitation, different forms of value creation and so on. Fuchs (2013; 2014), for example, focuses on the information and communication technologies (ICT) industry in general by discussing multiple labour forms such as miners, software developers, call centre workers as well as internet prosumers in relation to their role in the development of the digital economy and explores common grounds of their exploitation. In addition to such a broad approach, political economy studies mainly aim to investigate value creation practices of users/audiences on SMPs

with regard to how platforms monetise UGC and data by digging into advertisement-based revenue models of these platforms (Fisher, 2015; Fuchs, 2015; Na, 2015; Nixon, 2015). These studies shed light on the existing power asymmetries between platform owners, advertisers, states, and users and criticise user exploitation for economic profit, but there are also studies emphasising socially meaningful use-values users accumulate through their engagements on SMPs (Jarrett, 2015; 2016). These studies neither focus on digital labour practices on specific platforms nor on any particular national context. Rather, they investigate more generalised dynamics of digital labour in the platform economy.

There are also studies focusing specifically on YouTube concerning its platform economics. One of the focus areas is the revenue sources of the platform. So, for instance, Farchy (2009) and Wasko and Erickson (2009) discuss how YouTube translates activities of a large number of users into revenue through advertisement-based monetisation of UGC which eventually results in commercialisation of the platform. Andrejevic (2009), on the other hand, looks at how user labour is exploited within this economic model. Other research such as Jarrett (2008) and McDonald (2009) points out YouTube's commercial interests in relation to copyright issues. These studies demonstrate how the platform makes profit out of UGC. This study though chooses to focus on the productive and creative practices of such users who generate profitable content for the platform but who also benefit from their participation on the platform in different ways. Consequently, an approach shaped by the political economy alone is inadequate to establish the necessary data.

To describe political economy approaches, Havens, Lotz and Tinic (2009, p. 239) use a metaphor of "the jet plane vision" which obscures many details while providing a wide view of media industries as opposed to "the helicopter view" which provides a more detailed approach to a limited field or, in their words, documents "the complexity and contradiction of power relations that are often obscured at jet-plane heights". Put slightly differently, political economy studies fail to reveal working conditions of particular media producers and how media functions in their daily life (Lotz, 2009, p. 26). Political economy as a methodological framework for studying YouTube content creators thus neglects the role of individual agents during creative production processes. As Havens, Lotz and Tinic (2009, p. 238) note, it cannot be assured that production practices in media industries solely reflect the interests of people owning

the means of production. As Mansell (2012, p. 56) also mentions, political economy approaches, especially the Marxist tradition, do not "leave much scope for the observable and, at times, empowering ways in which people do appear to avoid exploitation by capitalist owners of the means of production". The interests of content creators themselves and their strategies for negotiating their creative relations during the production process (i.e., YouTube creators' negotiations with MCNs, advertisers and/or audiences) thus remain unknown and stay in the background.

Neglecting the role of individual agents also raises some ethical concerns for researching platformed content creation. As political economy approaches broadly situate content creators into the network of production, it undermines creators' capacity for self-representation regarding their subjective experiences. Unlike political economists, scholars of production studies address these concerns by acknowledging the agency of cultural producers since they understand labour as something subjectively experienced by workers within the media industry. Following their approach, the research questions of this study necessitate closer inquiry into the experiences of YouTube creators, centring on their subjective experiences in particular national contexts. This study, therefore, gives agency to creators themselves to hear their voices and elucidate how they value their own labour. Listening to the voices of labourers is important because this provides an opportunity to reveal "the underlying complexities and contradictions of media production" (Curtin and Sanson, 2017, p. 13). Therefore, rather than a macro-level industry-based approach, this study employs methods from both ethnographic and textual analysis frameworks which provide micro-level explanation of the particular experiences of YouTube creators in different socio-economic national contexts.

Textual Analysis

Textual analysis as a second frame for studying platformed content creation has a supportive role in my analysis of labour practices on YouTube. In the context of this research, I used multimodal textual analysis as one tool, among others such as interviews and observation, to identify the platform affordances and to understand the platform's vision, operating model, and governance as shapers of the productive and creative activity on YouTube. It is used to inform my interview questions and my interpretation of the data. Like the political economy approach, deploying methods

solely from textual analysis is also not enough to establish the necessary data because it has some limitations when studying platformed content creation on YouTube such as overlooking the conditions of media production and distribution. Therefore, utilising mixed methods is necessary to fully grasp subjective as well as localised experiences of Irish and Turkish YouTube creators.

Textual analysis, which combines various methods such as semiotics, ideological analysis, genre analysis and rhetorical analysis, generally looks at cultural artefacts to reveal common themes and discourses, and make "wider deductions" (Brennen, 2017b; Davis, 2008). In other words, it is a way to understand "how written, visual and spoken language helps us to create our social realities" (Brennen, 2017b, p. 204). Thus, textual analysis does not only make such wider deductions through written texts, but also analyses different forms of expressions and meaning creation via visual and spoken language. In media studies, a text refers to wide range of things such as books, films, video blogs, and games (Brennen, 2017b, p. 204). In YouTube studies, qualitative content analysis of video products and audiences' comments on the platform as cultural outputs is a common approach. As YouTube has a great variety of UGC, these studies yield different results by revealing multiple themes and discourses emerging in online video contents. Most of these studies, however, approach the text on YouTube as a discrete form, favouring explanation of one mode of expression. At this stage, I want to introduce the shortcomings of textual analysis by referencing the existing literature. This is crucial for understanding why the platform itself must be acknowledged as a multimodal text for the purposes of this research.

Since YouTube has accelerated the distribution of viral videos as a new form of expression, some studies have conceived of online video as a new media form and explored in what ways this form is utilised by users to express themselves. However, this approach does not grant access behind the scenes to understand the creative labour practices of those users. For example, Christensen (2009, p. 213) documents how Iraq war music videos on YouTube produced by US soldiers function as "a form of historical marker, or memorial of the living"; Wahlberg (2009) looks at YouTube videos as a form of commemoration through which people express their loss and grief; Peters and Seier (2009, p. 190) examine home dance videos as "a form of automediacy" to understand the mediation of self; Richard (2008) studies YouTube videos as a new form of "artistic expression"; and da Silva and Garcia (2012) analyse

video memes as a form of political satire. In these studies, YouTube videos as cultural outputs are explored to investigate user participation on YouTube. That is, their analyses are restricted to the emergent ways of expressions which allow users to mediate their selves, and thereby the production process of creating those self-representations remain unknown.

Another way of using textual analysis for YouTube videos is tracing the dynamics of networked production from a cultural perspective, and thereby the focus of studies adopting this approach is again on the end cultural products, not on the labour practices. Burgess (2008), for instance, focuses on how the participatory culture of YouTube paves the way for the emergence of viral videos; Bakioğlu (2016) and Morreale (2014) trace the evolution of certain YouTube channels via creator – audience interactions; and Kambouri and Hatzopoulos (2008) analyse the evolution of specific content themes through repetitive practices of multiple users. In order to explore networked forms of content creation on YouTube, these studies regard the "intertextuality" of YouTube videos, exploring them in terms of their relationships with other texts such as audiences' comments or parody and remix videos (Brennen, 2017b, p. 210). Textual analysis, however, does not provide access to dynamics of such production, rather it helps to demonstrate intertextual links of popular YouTube videos.

Textual analysis of video products, furthermore, has a potential to reveal different types of immaterial labour performed by YouTube creators. However, the discussion of labour practices in studies adopting this approach is merely derived from analysis of videos and therefore limited. For example, by situating creators' self and identity expressions into wider conceptual frameworks such as self-commodification, self-promotion, self-branding, and post-feminist self, Bevan (2017) points toward beauty labour, and Raun (2018) and Berryman and Kavka (2018) highlight the performances of affective labour. Moreover, Sujuko and Fatanti (2017) use visual semiotics as a method to understand the digital entrepreneurship practices of Indonesian creators who commodify their celebrity status to advertise a brand. Despite their focus on different forms of labour on YouTube, these studies are unable to reach the first-hand accounts of creators; do not integrate the platform affordances that shape labour practices; and overlook the conditions of media production and distribution.

Lastly, the textual analysis of audience comments and creators' performative acts in their videos used in some YouTube studies provides a limited approach for tracing the dynamics of audience – creator relations. For instance, Wotanis and McMillan (2014) analyse both the comments of audiences to understand how audiences create hostile environments for creators and uses rhetorical analysis of video products to reveal the competing strategies of creators in these contexts. Frobenius (2014) also uses textual analysis to understand creators' strategies for encouraging active audience involvement. Textual analysis in these cases is a conceivable method to detect certain themes that emerge in audiences' comments, to produce insight into reception of YouTube videos, and to reveal creator' tactics for audience engagement. However, creators form their relations with audiences via not only reading comments but also interacting them through direct messaging, organising offline meetups, and reviewing their YouTube channel and video analytics. In order to generate a deeper understanding of audience – creator relations, this study employed interviews with creators because their accounts on how they manage their creative relationships with audiences who are culturally situated subjects generate richer data.

These studies, more importantly, approach textual analysis from limited perspectives since they generally take video products and comment sections as their textual data, which neglects the multimodal textual formation of the platform. In that case, to understand how YouTube creators construct meaning, researchers analyse the textual data based on their own interpretations of video products and link these interpretations to wider online popular culture (Brennen, 2017b, p. 218). Accordingly, they produce knowledge about online popular culture, self-expression of cultural producers, identity production on such digital platforms as well as audience reactions. However, through methods of textual analysis, producing knowledge about the conditions of video production and distribution and relations of production is limited. This is because the lived experience of digital labour cannot be entirely deduced from what is represented on the screen. This study, on the other hand, values more creators' subjective as well as localised experiences during the production process or what is behind the scenes. As this study frames YouTube content creation as platform work and aims to investigate the labour process, it is not interested in the end products but more in the process of media production and distribution.

To better understand the labour process of YouTubing, however, it is necessary to acknowledge the platform itself as an important actor mediating the labour of content creation. This required applying an analytical eye to YouTube to understand how the platform's textual infrastructure like its affordances and other platform generated texts such as guidelines and policies shape YouTube creators' creative practices. The way YouTube frames its creators as partners instead of employees, how the platform deals with copyright issues, and the lack of affordances to form effective and private communication between creators and their audiences are some examples demonstrating the effects of the platform's mediation on labour practices with its policies and sociotechnical affordances. Accordingly, the criterion for textual analysis is to identify those aspects and this data was used to inform interview questions as well as my interpretation of the interview data. Hence, in this study, textual analysis was not used to analyse YouTube videos as end products of the creative labour process or audience comments to understand creator – audience relations. By approaching YouTube as a multimodal text, it was rather used to identify the platform affordances and regulatory frameworks with the help of the walkthrough method, which will be detailed in the following section.

Multimodal Textual Analysis: Walking-Through YouTube

Considering the limitations of previous literature in terms of textual analysis, this research took a more holistic approach to textual data on YouTube. When the platform itself is considered as part of the labour process, identifying its affordances and regulatory frameworks as constraints or shapers of activity becomes important and necessitates acknowledging the textual multimodality of the platform. It is, therefore, important to elaborate what the text is in YouTube's hypermediated environment for the sake of this research. When any YouTube video page is browsed, not only the video and audience comments on that page but also other texts in the form of numbers, buttons, icons, search bar, side bar, list of recommended videos are seen. To put it another way, on that web page, we encounter "a multiplicity of modes to articulate meaning" (Domingo, 2016, p. 544). Considering these multiple modes, Benson (2017, p. 1) suggests that "a much larger multimodal text in the form of the web page" is observable on YouTube. Taking this view a step further, he conceptualises YouTube itself as a more complex multimodal text which allows multiple authoring. The YouTube homepage, for example, includes many videos which are created by many

users and listed, or curated in a sense, by algorithms; has an interface design with specific affordances which is created by developers; and provides hyperlinks in the side bar which allows users to access other webpages authored by the company. YouTube as a multimodal text, therefore, presents unbound, interactive, and dynamic data for textual analysis. Considering that the main focus of this study is platform mediated creative digital labour, it is valuable to place emphasis on the platform with its multimodality in order to explore how the platform's infrastructure shapes and is being shaped by the creative digital labour of YouTube creators.

Acknowledging YouTube's textual multimodality is also necessary to understand the platform affordances which influence platform mediated labour practices. Hutchinson (2017) suggests that media production and distribution on contemporary digital platforms create a "convergence culture" which merges social use with technology and media enabled by the platform affordances. According to him, within these platforms, "cultural intermediation" emerges as a process of translating cultural capital which is co-created by platform users into economic capital, and this process is performed by both human and non-human actors. Thinking through the concept of affordances is, therefore, a useful way for expanding on the multimodal textual formation of YouTube. The concept of affordances, in simple terms, refers to what material artefacts enable people to do (Bucher and Helmond, 2017; Graves, 2007; Hutchby, 2001). Moving beyond the dichotomy of social constructivist and technological determinist approaches, Hutchby (2001, p. 444) argues that "affordances are functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object". To clarify, affordances enable and constrain certain activities in relation to a technological artefact and also their use might differ from one individual to another due to their relational aspects. The outstanding questions to be addressed in this research are: What agency does YouTube afford YouTube creators? What are the platform affordances of YouTube which enable and constrain the creative digital labour practices of creators? In addition to this, Bucher and Helmond (2017, p. 248) suggest that asking what the platform affords its users and what users afford to the platform are equally important. Following their point, it is also significant to consider what creators afford to the platform especially in consideration of the capital translation process described by Hutchinson (2017). In this sense, multimodal textual

analysis is necessary to understand the platform affordances but not enough to establish the primary data for this research.

To identify the affordances and governance regimes of the platform, I benefited from the walkthrough method. Despite being usually used to critically analyse mobile apps, this method provides a useful approach for multimodal textual analysis of YouTube in order to gain more holistic insight into the labour process of YouTube creators. Light, Burgess and Duguay (2018, p. 882) define this method as "a way of engaging directly with an app's interface to examine its technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shape their experiences". Employing this method results in a "particular story of mediation" (Light, 2018, p. 41) – a story about platformed content creation in the case of this research. Although I did not systematically engage in walking through the YouTube application, the method's approach to apps provided the background for my understanding and interrogation of creator labour. That is, I situated my analysis of the research participants' responses and my interpretation of their practices into the context of YouTube's affordances and regulatory frameworks.

For the method's data collection and analysis, Light, Burgess and Duguay (2018) outline three processes in which a researcher looks at expected and unexpected uses of an app and performs the technical walkthrough. Firstly, Light, Burgess and Duguay (2018, p. 889) suggest looking at "an app's vision, operating model, and governance" to explore expected usage practices on the part of people who own, design, or develop such app. In this sense, understanding YouTube's regulatory frameworks required looking at the company generated materials such as its official blog, terms, guidelines, and policies as well as its press releases. Depending on specific issues raised in the interview data, I traced certain labels (i.e., monetisation, partner program, copyright, fair use, algorithm etc.) on YouTube's official blog, YouTube Help page and YouTube Creator Academy page to identify useful documents. This helped me to understand how YouTube imagines its content creators and production practices, to identify its business model, and to capture how the platform governs its creators via the YPP, advertising policies, terms of service, community guidelines, copyright policies etc. In discussing how certain platform guidelines and policies affected the research participants, I benefited from those texts to provide background information. When those texts are referred in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, I cited them, and their details are

included in the bibliography. This process guided by the interview data, therefore, not only informed my discussion on creator labour mediated by YouTube but also helped me to demonstrate inconsistencies between the way the platform justifies its governance regime and changes in its regulatory framework and how those affect creators in practice.

Secondly, the walkthrough can reveal unexpected usage practices which are not consistent with the company's vision and are performed by users who use or create other artefacts which transform the platform affordances (Light, Burgess and Duguay, 2018, p. 895). In the case of YouTubing, using bots to increase the number of video views and subscribers and plugins for blocking ads might be some examples of unexpected practices. I paid attention to such usages while analysing the interview data, which helped me to identify a couple of strategies performed by creators to trick the algorithm such as changing the channel's location or producing clickbait content.

Thirdly, the technical walkthrough is the main data collection process by which the researcher engages directly with the app from a user's point of view. Light, Burgess and Duguay (2018, p. 891) describe this process as "applying an analytical eye to the processes of acquiring the app, registering, accessing features and functionalities and discontinuing use". In this process, they stress the app's materiality by considering its "mediator characteristics" such as "user interface arrangement", "functions and features", "textual content and tone" and "symbolic representation" to find out embedded discourses and how these material aspects shape user experiences. I did not systematically engage in the technical walkthrough but did pay attention to YouTube's mediator characteristics to get a sense of how those may shape content creator labour. This is because YouTube's materiality is key in determining what can/not be done on the platform and ultimately shapes creative practices, distribution of content and audience – creator relations. For the technical walkthrough, it was also necessary to pay attention to national YouTube sites by customising the location to Ireland and Turkey to see how YouTube's materiality changes based on location. This data in the form of fieldnotes was used to inform my interview questions. Furthermore, it should be noted that I was not able to access YouTube Creator Studio by which creators manage their channels or videos and access to monetisation, statistics, comments and so on as I was not a content creator. Some technical aspects were therefore missing from that data, and this generated further interview questions about those features. This

analytical eye also helped me understand how these material aspects of the platform shape creators' labour practices in the process of data analysis.

In this research, I put YouTube creators' subjective interpretations emerging from the interview data into the context of these affordances and regulatory frameworks to consider how they shape the activity of creators in the production and distribution process of creative outputs. Even though the multimodal textual design of the platform is acknowledged, textual analysis by itself is quite inadequate to fully grasp creative digital labour of YouTube creators which is performed through intertwined online and offline practices. Therefore, the main data for this research came from an ethnographic approach which will be justified in the next section.

Sociological and Ethnographic Approaches

While the former two approaches – political economy and textual analysis – are "indirect investigations" of platformed content creation, sociological and ethnographic approaches directly investigate practices and experiences of cultural producers themselves (Davis, 2008, p. 58). Instead of focusing solely on the production of cultural outputs with respect to power relations in media industries or the cultural outputs in terms of their content or form, sociological and ethnographic studies of cultural producers centre upon creation and promotion of such outputs. The idea here is to trace the dynamics of "production as a culture" within networks of production relations and to elucidate how a particular group of cultural producers "make culture, and, in the process, make themselves into particular kinds of workers" (Mayer, Banks and Caldwell, 2009a, p. 2). This study aimed to investigate the production culture of YouTube creators and their relations with the platform, MCNs, advertisers, co-creators, and audiences within the YouTube's production network. This required access to creators' thoughts, beliefs, interests, and actions which, in turn, necessitated deploying methods from an ethnographic approach such as interviews and observation.

Ethnography does not have a single standard definition as its meaning has shifted from the traditional anthropological sense originated in 19th century following its increasing usage in other disciplines such as Sociology, Cultural Studies, and Media Studies in the context of contemporary social research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). I use

the term ‘ethnography’, following Brennen’s (2017a, p. 167) description, to label “the qualitative method of observing, talking to and interacting with people in their natural environments; that is, where they live, play and/or work”. I, therefore, frame ethnography in a way that media researchers do when interacting with media producers and observing their work process in media production places (Brennen, 2017a, p. 169). I aimed to engage with Irish and Turkish YouTube creators and observe their media production practices in their workplaces because this research neither looks at platformed content creation from a broad industry level perspective nor explores digital cultural artefacts in terms of their form and content. Rather, this study’s research questions were addressed through employing methods from ethnography including semi-structured interviews and observation and combining them with the walkthrough method to identify the platform affordances and regulatory frameworks. The ethnographic approach for researching creative digital labour of YouTube creators not only revealed the practices of shared work culture patterns of creators in relation to the platform, MCNs, advertisers, and their co-creators and audiences. This approach also uncovered how such patterns differ in Ireland and Turkey. This study is, however, not a formal comparative study. Rather, location in this research works as a significant variable that illuminates differences in the subjective experiences of YouTube creators.

Early media production studies have focused on television and film production in different production landscapes (Mayer, Banks and Caldwell, 2009b); however, the development of the internet and the emergence of contemporary social media as a co-creative digital media production space have brought a new dimension to production studies. Even in television and film production, the discussions of participation by ordinary people in reality TV shows and their motivations (Grindstaff, 2009) or integration of audiences into production of TV series through screening parties and online fan communities which blurs the consumer/producer binary (Moore, 2009) have been mentioned in some ethnographic works. Since the emergence of social media sites as spaces of digital media production, such discussions have increased in order to explore the ways “ordinary” people engage in platformed content creation.

As opposed to methodological frameworks such as political economy and textual analysis, studies using interviews and/or observational methods to investigate user participation on YouTube are capable of understanding more deeply various forms of

participation on YouTube as they gain access to the platform users' interests, ideas and beliefs through first-hand accounts. Such studies directly engage with YouTube creators as cultural producers, and thus are able to produce a deeper understanding of social media content production process including their interests in content creation, use of different skills, efforts for promoting their channels, relations with audiences, and how creators value or understand their participation on the platform (Bishop, 2019; Duffy, 2017; Lange, 2019). Engaging directly with cultural producers to understand meaning making activities regarding their production process has also ethical advantages because giving voice to producers' accounts means "letting research participants speak for themselves" (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2018, p. 142), as well as provides a chance "to capture an alternative, better or more equal way of creating realities" (Saukko, 2018, p. 266). This has been a concern of production studies scholars who work on media production such as O'Brien (2014; 2015; 2018) who has explored gendered aspects of media work culture in Ireland. This is also my concern as I directly engaged with YouTube creators (in their workplaces in some cases) and aimed to understand the formation of their professional identities, their agency in the production process regarding their risk management strategies in precarious working conditions created by the platform and advanced in some national contexts, as well as their relations with MCNs and audiences.

Previous literature on platformed content creation has already shown that employing interviews and observational methods has the potential to explore various kinds of labour practices performed by content producers, different forms of value creation, the meanings they attach to content production, and their working conditions. Duffy (2017, p. 100), for example, has stressed aspirational labour and how these laborers "aim to resolve the tension between internal compulsions and external demands" in her study of the motivations of social media content producers and the meanings they attach to their work. Grünewald and Haupt (2014) have been able to elucidate different value creation forms of musicians on YouTube. Weare (2016, p. 4) has explicated "the material and ideological complexities of beauty YouTubers experiences". Instead of assuming the labour of video game commentators as merely talking to a camera, Postigo (2016) has revealed how YouTube's architecture and its affordances come together in the labour process to convert gameplay into economic capital. Duffy (2019) has also investigated various forms of immaterial labour in social media content

production, the working conditions of content creators, and differences between digital content creation and other forms of media production. The methods of interviewing and observing, therefore, provide the best means to delve into the labour process of YouTube creators or other social media producers like influencers and micro-celebrities as well as to elucidate various forms of value creation.

In terms of audience – creator relations, in the context of this research, interviewing YouTube creators helped me to produce knowledge of how creators manage their relations with audiences as well as the ways they make use of audience comments and video analytics during the creative production process. Previous studies have demonstrated that conducting interviews enables researchers to gain a deeper insight into what audiences' reactions mean for content creators (Lange, 2008b) or how cultural producers perform relational labour to promote their work and increase their monetary gain (Baym, 2015). In addition to these insights, ethnographic studies carry a potential to reveal other ways in which audiences interact with producers such as sending them products to try out in new videos, sending them gifts, following their other social media pages, and even being involved in a face-to-face interaction.

YouTube creators distribute their creative video products, promote their channels, and engage with their audiences via the internet. Consequently, their labour practices are intrinsically tied to the internet. As this research employed methods from ethnography to understand the labour of YouTube creators, it is necessary to review how these methods are used and discussed in the post-internet era which is characterised by "various capacities, infrastructures, or cultural formations facilitated by digital communication networks" (Markham, 2018, p. 652). In order to inquire "what kinds of data about social life emerge when they [methodologists] examine cultural artefacts … or what kinds of data are created by online communities", it is necessary to make methodological adjustments or adaptations in social research (Lincoln and Denzin, 2018, p. 923). Markham (2018, pp. 656-658) summarises ethnographies for researching the internet related activities under three headings: "ethnographies of networked sociality", "ethnographies of immersive environments", and "ethnographies of the contemporary social world in a digital age".

The first approach sees the internet as a tool or medium which facilitates communication and cultural production between users (Markham, 2018, p. 656), and

thus such studies focus on networked sociality and online culture (Lange, 2008b). In the second approach, internet researchers in social sciences and humanities have attached binary adjectives such as digital, virtual, and online to ethnography because they focus on the internet as a new distinct space, namely cyberspace, such as an online game or a social media platform (Markham, 2018, p. 657). This approach to ethnography assumes "a pre-existing distinction between virtual world and real world" by solely focusing on the former as if online user profiles in games or platforms are quite distinct from users' real-life selves (Hine, 2015, p. 24). Boellstorff *et al*. (2012, p. 1), for instance, draw a distinction between physical worlds and virtual worlds by defining the latter "as valid venues for cultural practice" which "draw upon physical world cultures in multiple ways yet at the same time create possibilities for the emergence of new cultures and practices". Although they acknowledge possible ways in which these two worlds intertwine with each other, new online cultures and practices developed through the internet related activities are inherently bonded to physical worlds. Moore (2009, p. 126), moreover, takes "screening party environments and one particular virtual space as peripheral sites of production" in which audiences of a TV series take part in the series' production process. Considering YouTube media production, the internet emerges neither as a tool that facilitates YouTube creators' labour practices nor a distinct space in which creators perform their creative labour practices.

For the purposes of this research, the third approach enables inquiry into the ways in which the internet is integrated into the labour process of YouTube creators. Markham (2018, p. 658) describes "the internet as a way of being" emphasising "the way that the internet seems to disappear when there is a very close interweaving of technology and human, receding into the basic frame for how we see the world". The creative digital labour practices of YouTube creators are intertwined with various digital technologies including the digital platform with its sociotechnical affordances, digital video editing software, and digital devices such as computers, mobile phones, and cameras. In this context, it is important to acknowledge that the internet is "embedded, embodied, and everyday" as Hine (2015, p. 58) argues. Hence, there is no need to attach such qualifying adjectives to ethnography while researching creative digital labour practices of YouTube creators. At this point, I want to clarify how Hine's

approach is also useful in the contexts of this research before conceptualising the field site of the research.

At this stage of our experiences with the internet, its embeddedness in our daily lives is widely acknowledged. To explore this approach further, Hine (2015, p. 33) suggests looking at how the internet "becomes entwined in use with multiple forms of context and frames of meaning-making" rather than forming a new space apart from everyday life. Taking a similar perspective to study platformed content creation entails paying attention to how the internet is embedded in the labour practices of YouTube creators. When the labour process of YouTube content production is taken into account, it should be acknowledged that creators do not enter cyberspace as a separate workplace because there is a continuity between online and offline workplaces. Their labour process continues when they go offline such as filming and editing videos, thinking about new creative ideas, and meeting with fans. This is the workplace as much as when they go online to upload video contents, reply, or read audience reactions, organise the channel content and monitor the channel statistics by using multiple electronic devices that facilitate such online activities. Working online and offline are, therefore, intertwined processes in the context of platformed content creation.

The embeddedness of the internet via the continuity between going online and offline in the labour process of YouTubing also suggests a continuity between online and offline selves which accounts for the embodied internet. In other words, as Hine (2015, p. 41) argues, "virtual identities are not necessarily separate from physical bodies". YouTube creators maintain their identity as cultural producers in both online and offline sites. Another important point regarding this raised by Hine (2015, p. 44) is that the internet users are "socially situated bodies"; thus, their experiences of using the internet are shaped by different socio-economic contexts. By considering the embodied internet experiences of Irish and Turkish YouTube creators, their creative digital labour practices are also shaped by different socio-economic as well as political contexts of Ireland and Turkey. The embodied internet approach is useful to acknowledge variances in creative digital labour practices of YouTube creators instead of homogenising them as cultural producers under a global platform.

In the case of platformed content creation, the internet often emerges as a mundane infrastructure confirming Hine's argument about the everyday internet. Due to the

embeddedness of the internet in the labour process of YouTube creators and embodied experiences emerging out of producing online video contents, the internet is often treated as something ordinary in intertwined online and offline worksites. The everydayness of the internet is inherent in YouTube creators' creative practices since they produce creative contents to upload to the internet before anything else. However, Hine (2015, p. 53) also reminds us that the internet has a potential to be topicalised or become a subject matter of everyday discussions in specific occasions, and ethnographic research should pay attention to those circumstances. The ways the internet is topicalised in the case of YouTube creators might generate insight on how particular national contexts shape their labour.

All things considered, this ethnographic framework provides a useful lens for studying the creative digital labour practices of Irish and Turkish YouTube creators emerging in complicated landscapes of production where creative labour practices are interweaved with digital technologies. The field site of this research thus is not "static but rather dynamic", which is necessary to trace both material and immaterial aspects of creators' labour (Lupton, 2015, p. 51). The labour process of YouTube creators consists of video production, negotiating their creative relations with co-producers, MCNs, advertisers and audiences, possible engagements with audiences in both online and offline sites, cross-platform content management as well as utilising channel data on the platform. Hence, YouTube creators' workplaces emerge as intertwined online and offline sites. A dynamic research field constituted by an assemblage of actors and sites thus emerge in this study: YouTube creators as creative digital content producers; MCNs as intermediaries between creators and brands; advertisers who fund digital media; audiences who provide data commodities for the platform and interact with creators in multiple ways; YouTube as a platform with its social, technical and economic affordances; the physical office spaces in which creators produce their content and/or other production locations; and national geopolitics. All of these need to be examined in order to generate a holistic study which required employing mixed methods from both textual analysis and ethnographic frameworks.

Data Collection Procedures

In this study, the central research data was collected by way of interviewing and observation. For all research involving human participants, Maynooth University

requires alignment with its Research Ethics Policy in order to carefully consider the ethical implications of research undertaken by researchers and doctoral candidates within the institution. My research has gone through a detailed review process in which I thoroughly considered the ethical implications of this study on my research participants, including a focus on the nature of the vulnerability which may come from the precarious nature of their work, the geopolitical contexts in which they create content as well as the potential power relationship between creators working in PHs and their employers. Hence, I got an approval from The Social Research Ethics Subcommittee of Maynooth University before starting the data collection process.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The primary data for the research was gathered through interviews with YouTube creators as main agents of cultural production to produce extensive knowledge on their creative digital labour practices. The research participants were diverse. They were selected from YouTube creators who actively produce creative content or who have engaged in content production in the past before moving to other media sectors, rather than professionals or artists who promote their already existing businesses or works on YouTube. In addition to creators who work independently, those who are employed in formal workplaces such as PHs and have a specific role in the division of labour concerning media production, as well as those who own or are partners of such PHs were also recruited into this research. The PHs for which research participants create content are different in size depending on the number of employees (2 to 10, 11 to 50, and 51-200 employees), subscriber range (more than 100K, 1M, and 3M) and their founders (a media entrepreneur or a YouTuber). Those working in the context of a PH were included in the research sample because they perform some, if not all, of the tasks a YouTube creator should perform. Including experiences of those YouTubing in PHs was valuable to this research as it helped me to identify important differences stemming from YouTubing in formal workplaces while also exploring their shared work culture with individual YouTube creators.

This diversity is also visible in their channels' subscriber numbers and content genres. The research participants produce content across variety of genres including entertainment (i.e., challenge videos, role-play, comedy sketches), beauty & lifestyle, vlogs (i.e., travel and daily), tutorials, film reviews, and interviews with celebrities.

Regarding the number of subscribers, the channels for which they create content were also diverse and the study included YouTube channels having less than 1K and more than 10K, 25K, 100K, 1M, and 3M subscribers. This diversity was illuminating to explore what they have in common regarding the challenges of content creator labour in relation to the aspects of platformisation and localisation. Thanks to this diversity in the research sample, the study highlights that the precarious nature of YouTubing is observable in the experiences of both aspiring creators and those who secured a liveable income with a large following base; both individual creators and those working in PHs; and both creators producing content in niche genres and those creating content in popular genres where there is higher competition.

I used a purposive snowball sampling method which is a technique for recruiting research subjects through following the suggestions of initially identified subjects (Yin, 2016, p. 95). This sampling method has limitations for generating a representative sample because people are prone to engaging others who share similar interests and practices with them. This research, however, aimed to collect rich qualitative data rather than broader generalisable data so representative sample was not a priority. This sampling method, therefore, served for the purposes of this research. Snowball sampling is usually used to "access 'hard to reach' and 'sensitive' populations" (Browne, 2005, p. 48). As I aimed to interview not only individual creators but also those working in closed workspaces such as PHs, using this method had a potential to recruit those who work behind-the-scenes as production managers, assistants or directors and whose name are not credited on YouTube videos. Recruiting subjects through snowballing thus helped me to gain access to those workplaces as well as those working behind-the-scenes through building on creators' interpersonal networks. Furthermore, considering that YouTube media production relies very much on networked relations as most creators, including those who work independently, collaborate with others, this sampling methods provided an advantage to reveal co-creative or collaborative YouTube production dynamics.

To start recruiting initial research subjects, I used my contacts who previously worked in a PH in Istanbul, Turkey. Thus, I built on my existing personal network to access a PH and then utilised their interpersonal networks to recruit more subjects. I was able to recruit 9 research subjects, 6 of whom were male and 3 were female, in Turkey. Recruiting research subjects was easier in Turkey because most participants were part

of an active creator community. At the time of the research, all Turkish participants were making a sustainable full-time income from YouTubing. While 2 of them were independent creators, 7 of them were working in the context of a PH with different and sometimes multiple titles such as a manager, a company partner/owner, a content editor, a director, a production manager, a video head, and a YouTube creator.

In Ireland, the recruitment process was much harder since I did not have previous contacts; I first contacted 2 creators, but they did not create a snowball effect to reach more subjects since they were not part of an active creator community. Subsequently, I attended a couple of creator events such as a vlogger event organised by a local YouTuber community or a gaming event which hosted YouTuber meetups and Q&A sessions. Participating in these events helped me to identify a couple of YouTube creators to take part in this research and then I recruited others following their suggestions. At the end, I was able to recruit 7 research subjects, 4 of whom were male and 3 were female, in Ireland. At the time of the research, none of the Irish participants, except one who used to work in a PH, were able to generate a livable income from YouTubing. Thus, 6 of the Irish creators were aspirational and had other income sources coming from their full-time or freelance jobs.

The recruitment of research subjects was based on voluntary participation and, in line with the institutional ethics protocol, all subjects were fully informed about the aims of the study, the processes of data collection, as well as data usage, storage, anonymisation and disposal. I obtained a signed informed consent form from all subjects. The information sheet that was prepared for the participants is in the Appendix A and the consent form that was signed by the participants is in the Appendix B. Because of ethical considerations, I gave a pseudonym to every subject and PH at the earliest stage. The full lists of research subjects including their age range and gender, their affiliated PHs, their channels' subscriber range, and the time and type of interview they participated are also listed in the appendices C and D.

I designed the interviews as semi-structured which better utilises "the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues" since the researcher has a chance to direct the focus of the conversation to whatever s/he considers important and allow the research subject to become visible "as a knowledge-producing participant" during the interviews (Brinkmann, 2018, p. 579). The semi-structured interviews covered multiple

dimensions including the processes of video production, creators' relations with co-creators and audiences, the meanings they attached to their work, their localised experiences as YouTube creators in Ireland and Turkey as well as the nature of their affiliation with MCNs. The duration of interviews was ranged from 40 minutes to 2-hours depending on the nature of conversation and the availability of the research participants.

Interviews were planned to be conducted in person unless the participant lived outside of Dublin or Istanbul because in-person interviews "enable interpersonal contact, context sensitivity, and conversational flexibility to the fullest extent" (Brinkmann, 2018, p. 578). Online interviews such as interviewing through emails or chats, on the other hand, have some shortcomings as they are based on textual communication between researchers and participants. While the researcher has a chance to observe the use of gestures and facial expressions as well as to hear the tone of voice during verbal communication, s/he misses such actions and consequently cannot detect some meanings in text-based communication (Sade-Beck, 2004, p. 48). I, therefore, preferred to conduct face-to-face interviews with the participants until the research was interrupted by the pandemic. Following the introduction of Covid-19 public health measures such as travel restrictions, I had to switch from face-to-face interviews to online interviews in mid-March 2020. I, nevertheless, conducted online interviews via video calling or voice calling in order to mitigate some of the drawbacks of text-based communication. Online interviews, however, posed a great challenge in terms of recruiting new research participants. This is because I was unable to visit creators' workplaces or office spaces and attend creator events where I had opportunities to meet potential research participants in-person and recruit them into my research as participants. The inability to access those fieldwork sites made it much harder to recruit new participants as I needed to send emails and wait for replies. This had considerably slowed down the process of data collection. So, considering the time frame of my PhD, I had to cease collecting new data earlier than expected and move to data analysis.

As I recruited YouTube creators who work in co-creative environments of PHs, there were concerns about the impact of my research on their affiliation or employment relations with PHs and working relations with their co-creators. In order to avoid placing the research participants into a difficult position, I paid attention to such

sensitivities and was mindful of their workplace context. Therefore, I gave them an opportunity to review transcripts of interviews to correct or remove some parts and allow them to withdraw their consent at any time. Acknowledging the participants' agency in this way also helped me to eliminate power asymmetry between the observer and the observed which is an important aspect of ethical data gathering (Erickson, 2018).

Observation

I aimed to conduct an observational study while YouTube creators were producing their videos in order to gain more detailed insight into their labour process and co-creative relations. Since the presence of the researcher during the interviews might affect the production of accounts of creators, I considered that supporting the interviews with observations provides an advantage because "the data from each can be used to illuminate the other" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, pp. 101-102). The intention was to make 3 observations in each country. Observations were designed to incorporate multiple video production and post-production sites such as PHs, office spaces provided by MCNs and/or exterior filming locations in order to reduce "bias and lack of representativeness" (Yin, 2016, p. 152). However, because of the pandemic, I was able to conduct only one observation in one of the PHs. Prior to the pandemic restrictions, though, I also visited the PH-2 and PH-3 in Istanbul, Turkey, and the office space of one of Irish participants in Dublin, Ireland to conduct interviews. During these visits, though, my observations were limited to the descriptions of production sites and inadequate to produce rich fieldnotes regarding creators' use of technical equipment and software, the division of labour in media production and their co-creative relations.

The observational study took place in the PH-1 in December 2019 in Istanbul, Turkey. Gaining access to such locations for observation is usually a challenging aspect of the fieldwork. I first visited the PH-1 to conduct interviews with its manager and content editor. When I mentioned my intention to undertake an observation, the manager invited me to their filming day in which they produced 7-8 different YouTube videos with a team of creators. Once I obtained the organisational consent from the manager, I also sought consent from the recruited subjects who work in the PH-1, and they gave their permission to participate in the observational research as well. Consequently, the

participants had a chance to release themselves from the observation. Additionally, before the observation, I introduced my research to the whole group in the PH-1 to make sure that there was not anyone who did not want to be observed. During the observations, my focus, however, was on the formal participants of this research.

The duration of the observation was determined by the nature of the practices under observation, and it lasted 8 hours as I spent almost a full working day with them, starting from 11 AM to 7 PM. During the observation, my role was the "observer as participant", meaning I did not actively engage in participants' production activities, but I talked with them and conducted informal short interviews based on my observations (Brennen, 2017a, p. 173). I had these small conversations with the participants mostly during their break time in order not to disturb their production workflow. Furthermore, the participants were not asked to perform any task other than their normal working practices during the observation.

The observation generated qualitative data in the form of field notes which included descriptive as well as reflective notes. Descriptions of production sites; the practices of video production; interactions among co-creators including verbal and nonverbal communications; and their use of technical equipment and software (i.e., cameras, computers, microphones, lighting, video editing software etc.) was the focus of my observation. As a result, I was able to gain knowledge about their video production skills, the practices of YouTube video production as well as the participants' co-creative relations. It was unfortunate that the context of the pandemic denied gathering more of this kind of data. Nevertheless, the insights I did get from this one observation were useful in understanding at least a little better the labour practices of these creators.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research refers to the whole "process of making sense of the data and discovering what it has to say" (Holliday, 2007, p. 89). This process consists of preparing the data for analysis, reducing the data via a process of coding to identify themes and patterns, and presenting the data in a discussion (Creswell, 2007, p. 148).

In order to prepare the data for analysis, I first transcribed all audio recordings of interviews into text. This process helped me to immerse myself into the research data.

While transcribing audio recordings, I also engaged in memoing which refers to "the act of recording reflective notes" about what I am learning from the data (Groenewald, 2008, p. 505). These notes included emerging themes and their relations with the literature and theoretical frameworks that might be helpful to interpret the data (van den Hoonaard, D. K. and van den Hoonaard, W. C., 2008, p. 187).

It is also important to note that interviews with Turkish participants were conducted in Turkish. There might be a concern about loss of meaning during translation especially in terms of conveying cultural nuances or contextual meanings particular to such language (Roulston, 2014, p. 300). However, I first analysed the Turkish data in its original language in order to avoid loss of meaning in the data analysis process. Then, as a native Turkish speaker who has a good command of English language, I translated the Turkish interview excerpts into English only when presenting the data and paid detailed attention to capture nuance of meaning.

After completing the process of transcription, I engaged in coding as a way of organising qualitative data and relating the collected data to my interpretive ideas about data (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, p. 27). This is an important stage of qualitative data analysis but is not the analysis itself. While reading through the textual interview data, I initially identified and coded particular themes and did not use any qualitative data analysis software. A code, in qualitative research, refers to "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 3). This first stage of coding decontextualises data because it "is used to break up and segment the data into simpler, general categories" (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, p. 30). In the later stages of analysis, however, the researcher thinks through how the identified categories relate to each other and thus recontextualises the data thereby keeping the analysis integrated (Ayres, 2008, p. 868). The second stage of coding is therefore done via focused coding in order to develop major themes, which reassembles the data (Saldaña, 2013, p. 213). At this stage, I was also able "to compare newly constructed codes … across other participants' data to assess comparability and transferability" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 217). As Coffey and Atkinson (1996, p. 30) note, coding is therefore "a mixture of data reduction and data complication". In other words, the interview data that is reduced to certain codes in the first stage is later teased out to formulate major themes in relation to the research questions.

These thematic codes formed the basis of the thesis outline including chapters, sections, and subsections under which I interpret some of the important research findings and developed my arguments (Holliday, 2007, p. 91). Writing itself was, therefore, a part of analysis since I had to return to the codes, themes, and memos to reorganise them and to interpret them in relation to the existing research and theory (Roulston, 2014, p. 305). The main research findings are presented in the following three empirical chapters which included interview excerpts as evidence to support my arguments.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented how I designed this research and the processes of data collection and analysis. Although there are different methodological approaches to study platformed content creation, I foregrounded the necessity of accessing creators' own accounts to address the research questions raised in this study. This required employing methods from ethnography such as interviews and observations in order to understand creators' own realities in their working lives. Furthermore, since creators' media production and distribution practices are mediated by the platform, it was also necessary to identify YouTube's affordances and regulatory frameworks which affect the labour practices. I, therefore, proposed a more holistic approach for textual analysis which benefited from the walkthrough method to understand the multimodal textual formation of the platform. While interpreting the qualitative data, I put the subjective accounts of creators into the context of platform affordances. In the next three chapters, I present my main research findings.

Chapter 4

Making a Media Career on and beyond YouTube: Diversity in Professional Identities of YouTube Creators

Introduction

This chapter sets out to investigate creators' self-descriptions of their media work as part of SME as well as the future of their career. The investigation of such diversity requires multidimensional exploration. First, the chapter focuses on YouTube content creation beyond dichotomies of amateur/professional and commercial/non-commercial to situate the creators' media production within the hybrid space of YouTube. Second, it looks at YouTube content creation as an emerging profession by paying attention to the platform's attempts to institutionalise and professionalise the field of UGC. Third, it introduces different modes of production on YouTube in relation to the division of labour, which ultimately has an effect on the professional identities that the research participants claim. Lastly, the chapter takes a closer look at how creators describe their YouTube production practices and imagine the future of their career. This demonstrates the diversity in their self-identifications and the required necessity and flexibility in maintaining or imagining multiple professional identities.

YouTube Content Creation: Beyond Dichotomies

Throughout the long history of involvement of non-professionals in video production, the boundary between amateurism and professionalism has been maintained or at times blurred through discursive practices. Investigating the history of homemade movies, Zimmermann (1995, pp. xii-xiii) notes that the public discourse shaped by industrial formations, technical standards, and aesthetic norms in relation to professional film degraded amateur media into a private hobby. Within this framework, "professionalism suggests performing a task for financial return, and amateurism indicates doing something for pleasure, for the sheer love of it, as its Latin root—*amare*—denotes" (Zimmermann, 1995, p. 1). To clarify, professional engagement in video production is attributed to those who are qualified with skills and who operate

within the market economy, whereas amateur video-making is marginalised as operating within the private sphere of individuals and outside of economic relations. The dominant understanding, therefore, equates the amateur with those who are "unpaid, untrained, and inexperienced" in a direct opposition to the professional (Brabham, 2012, p. 402).

However, such "unidimensional thinking that pits amateur against professional in terms of, say, little versus great skills, intrinsic versus extrinsic reward, avocational versus vocational orientation, or leisure versus work activity" is misleading in grasping the nature of each category (Stebbins, 1992, p. 58). Rather, Stebbins (1992, p. 67, original emphasis) argues that "professionals, amateurs, and their publics coalesce into *core* systems of relations and relationships". Similarly, beyond these dichotomous categories, Leadbeater and Miller (2004, pp. 20-21) suggest the term *pro-am* as "a new social hybrid" to identify those who engage in an activity as amateurs but also are dedicated to such activity with "a sense of obligation and necessity" to meet professional standards. This newly coined term is welcomed by media scholars who study platformed content creation and distribution of these so-called amateurs (Duffy, 2015; Nayar, 2017; Vonderau, 2010).

Situating YouTube content creators into contemporary media production is not immune from the discussions of distinctions between amateurs, professionals and pro-ams. Within the participatory culture of YouTube, "home-grown forms and practices" associated with amateurism (Burgess and Green, 2018) are thoroughly examined with the neologism of UGC "as an outcome of the coevolution of the platform-based online sector with the media industries, facilitated by the development of digital technologies" (Dwyer, 2019, p. 194). Similar to the earlier binary thinking, UGC is defined in a direct opposition to professionally generated content (PGC) pertaining to commercial media production (Lobato, Thomas and Hunter, 2013, p. 3). What makes YouTube peculiar is that these two are not actually separated but entangled because the platform not only blurs the media producer/consumer dichotomy but also invents new ways in which the amateur/professional, social/economic and commercial/non-commercial interact and converge (Burgess and Green, 2009a, p. 90; Snickars and Vonderau, 2009, p. 11). As Burgess and Green (2018, p. 12) state, "it is the dynamic tensions and synergies between them [UGC and PGC] that have animated YouTube's growth, diversity, and change over time as a platform; and both have always had a

commercial side". Such traditional dichotomies, therefore, are not useful considering that the various forms of labour practices of content creators are situated within the contemporary platform capitalism (Taylor, T. L., 2018, p. 34).

This is clear in this study where there is observable diversity among the research participants that consist of creators who have affective and/or economic motivations, work independently or in formal workplaces, engage in paid or non-paid work, have formal training in other media industries like journalism, cinema and television or are self-taught. Instead of placing their media production practices under such binary categories, I suggest seeing all creators as part of YouTube's "hybrid cultural-commercial-expressive space" in order to highlight the complexity regarding professional identities of the research participants (Lobato, 2016b, p. 349).

YouTube Content Creation: An Emerging Profession

In the early days, YouTube was predominantly dependent on those early amateurs who enjoyed creating and sharing content – or "the reserve army of the Web" as Kostakis (2009, p. 457) calls them – to add value to the platform. YouTube's priority was to populate the platform with engaging content to increase views which later successfully turned into a commercial feature based on advertising (Stokel-Walker, 2019). The platform has bubbled with UGC which ensured its popularity within SME and thus its advertising revenue. More recently, YouTube has taken various steps to professionalise, formalise and regulate the field of UGC such as introducing the Content ID system for copyright infringements, supporting the formation of MCNs, creating YouTube Studios, welcoming PGC from traditional media industries and introducing the YPP for revenue sharing (Burgess, 2013; Burgess and Green, 2018; Cunningham, Craig and Silver, 2016; Cunningham and Craig, 2019; Kim, 2012). Along with these steps which have been taken to make the platform a more ad-friendly space, the binary between UGC and PGC has also blurred.

One major evolution leading to the institutionalisation of YouTube and professionalisation of content creation is the introduction of the YPP which emerged from the platform's partnership with advertisers and allowed sharing its revenue with creators. In May 2007, YouTube (2007b) gave a partner status to a number of purposefully selected content creators who produced popular and original content and

secured large audiences. This partner status allowed creators to receive a share from YouTube's ad revenue and full-time YouTubing became a potential media career. In December 2007, the platform expanded the pilot of the YPP to include a broader community of creators who lived in the USA and Canada, and later in 2008 included to those in the UK, Japan, Australia, and Ireland (YouTube, 2007a; 2008a; 2008b). In April 2012, YouTube (2012) updated the eligibility criteria for the YPP across 20 countries which made the programme more accessible, and it became available in Turkey in October 2012 after the introduction of the platform's localised version.

After the launch of the YPP, YouTube actively supported the formation of MCNs as discussed in Chapter 2. While MCNs initially helped YouTube to professionalise the field of UGC, formalise the SME industry, and make the platform more ad-friendly, YouTube later leaned towards taking control of creator management. To that end, the platform created an educational video series called "YouTube 101" to teach the basic features to new creators in 2010; launched YouTube Spaces in major cities around the world in 2012 providing creators with an opportunity to learn from training programs, connect with other creators, and create in professional studios with higher quality technological equipment; broadened its catalogue of online lessons for growing one's channel by introducing the YouTube Creator Academy in 2013; and also made those lessons accessible to non-English speaking creators by offering them in more than 20 languages in 2014 (YouTube, 2010; 2013; 2014a; 2014b; 2021). These initiatives of the platform, as Cunningham and Craig (2019, p. 142) highlight, could be seen as a McDonaldisation[2] of the platformed content creation through standardised training with a regular emphasis on certain practices: "pursue your passion, upload regularly, learn to use basic YouTube analytics, develop your individual brand, use thumbnails and metadata efficiently and effectively, and practice community engagement and interaction strategies at best-practice level".

All of these paved the way for the emergence of an "independent ad hoc pseudo-professional labour force who generated advertising income for and through YouTube" (Tabares, 2019, p. 389). This new economic affordance of the platform

[2] McDonaldisation refers to a process in which the principles of fast-food restaurants including efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control are adopted in various sectors (Ritzer, 1983; 2019). McDonaldisation of the platformed content creation is used to draw attention to YouTube's attempt to standardise training and to professionalise its creators by adopting those principles.

facilitated the emergence of "YouTubing as a profession" (Riboni, 2020, p. 26). In relation to this, scholars have widely studied how the binary between amateur and professional became blurred (Bakioğlu, 2016; Burgess and Green, 2009a; Duffy, 2015; Morreale, 2014; Pramono *et al.*, 2020; Tabares, 2019). As a result, self-professionalised YouTube creators have integrated into an emerging creative workforce of SME along with bloggers and influencers (Duffy and Wissinger, 2017). Individual creators in this research also joined the YPP with an aspiration to make money, whereas some of the participants are indirectly tied to the YPP as they are waged laborers in PHs that generate revenue through the YPP in addition to external sponsorship deals. While the YPP provides creators with a chance to monetise their creative outputs, it also assigns a precarious professional status to creators who work in the absence of fixed pay rates (Tabares, 2019, p. 396). The precarious nature of creators' work will be thoroughly discussed in Chapter 5; what is important to note here, though, is that the lack of income security affects some creators' transition from other professions to full-time YouTubing and thereby creates double working lives consisting of income-generating work and creative media production on YouTube.

Media Production on YouTube

The precarious nature of YouTubing stemming from the absence of fixed pay rates creates uncertainty regarding how creators form or maintain their professional identities. Some of this uncertainty also comes from the nature of how work is organised. On YouTube, there is not one mode of video production and distribution. YouTubing can be performed by an independent creator, but also be performed by a team of creators in PHs. As each mode requires creators to perform different tasks that require different skills, how YouTubing is organised needs attention to understand the diversity in professional identities. These aspects of YouTube labour materialise in my interviews and observation. Most of the independent creators that participated in this research identify with the identity of YouTuber as they are involved in the entire process of video production and distribution. Those working in PHs, on the other hand, identify with their roles in the process of YouTubing.

UGC "is often imagined as a disruptive, creative force, something spontaneously emerging from the creativity of individual users newly enabled as expressive agents by digital technologies" (Lobato, Thomas and Hunter, 2013, p. 3). Within SME, the

access gained to advertisers and audiences which enabled monetisation of UGC has resulted in, as Duffy and Wissinger (2017, p. 4655) note, "the emergence of a new archetype of career success, embodied by Internet personalities—fashion bloggers, YouTubers, and social influencers, among others—who seemingly make a living from their passion projects". Content creators in SME thus represent part of a broader trend of contemporary work that is characterised by "the affective weighting attached to personalised and increasingly individualised work" (Taylor and Luckman, 2018, p. 2). Accordingly, UGC on YouTube is mostly associated with an individualised production process as the platform's former tagline 'Broadcast Yourself' denotes; this created the assumption of formalisation of professional identity as a YouTuber.

The individualised production process refers to "the total integration of the individual in the filmmaking process" due to the collapsed division of labour similar to that found in amateur filmmaking (Zimmermann, 1995, p. 132). The term division of labour, broadly speaking, expresses "sectoral differences in an economy, the occupations and skills of a labour force, and the organisation of tasks within a firm" (Miller, 2011, p. 87). When there is a division of labour, the overall task is first decomposed into smaller, standardised and narrowly defined subtasks which are performed by different workers and then these subtasks are arranged "into a production process, a fixed set of relationships between workers, machines and materials" to secure specialisation (Dwyer, 2019, p. 16). In media production, the division of labour has resulted in "an above/below-the-line demarcation" (Vonderau, 2016a, p. 32) referring to the separation between creative and technical/craft labour (Banks, 2009; Caldwell, 2008; Landman, 2009; Stahl, 2009): The former is formed by writers, directors, producers, actors or "symbol creators" as Hesmondhalgh (2012) calls them; the latter consists of production designers, camera operators, sound recorders, set designers, props manufacturers, costume designers and so on.

YouTube creators, except for those who rank very high in SME, merge creative and technical labour in video production, which is also evident in the practices of individual creators who participated in this project. That is "the creator has replaced the writer, producer, director, and actor above the line, as well as the editor, location scout, composer, and visual effects supervisor and other craft labourers below the line" (Cunningham and Craig, 2019, p. 86). When asked to describe the processes of video production during the interviews, individual creators detailed various tasks that are

normally performed by different workers in traditional media production and that require multiple skills. For instance, Oisin, who is a freelance videographer and part-time independent Irish creator, talked about generating content ideas, scripting, casting, location management, directing and video editing:

> So, I've to come up with the idea first. … then I'll script … just outline what are the sort of key bits I need to get and then align the different gear I need for it and the different props that I need for it and the different locations I need to shoot it at. And then following day, or whenever I can do it, I get my friends involved, and I normally have one camera operator so that'd be me or somebody else. Then I need talents to be in the video. And then we go out and shoot it and I guess when we're shooting it, I'm just making sure that we have enough angles and stuff that the video makes sense. … the next day I'll start editing, which can take anywhere from six to nine hours to just get the whole story together, and then only have that consultation of a couple of my friends to get the thumbnail right because the thumbnail can be difficult.

Oisin clearly described how he is fully integrated into all process of video-making. It should be noted that there might be exceptional cases where creators might collaborate with other creators or sometimes with friends. In other words, individual creators do not always engage in an individualised production process as there are cases which bring different actors together and result in a temporary, mostly non-hierarchical, and project-based division of labour.

After completing the production process, creators need to distribute those creative outputs. Conor who is a freelance videographer and an individual YouTube creator in Ireland described the distribution process as follows:

> When I distribute my video, firstly, I upload it to YouTube and then share the videos on Facebook and Instagram because I found that both of those channels at the moment have a really good organic reach in terms of like audience distribution. So, I get a lot of views from, like those third-party channels. A big portion of my views come from either Facebook or Instagram or Twitter.

The distribution of YouTube videos necessitates cross-platform promotion of their creative products in order to increase their video views.

The labour process of YouTubing also requires regular engagement with audiences. Irish participant Luke who is a freelance videographer and an individual YouTube creator described how he communicates with his followers:

> Every time I upload a video, … for the next couple of hours, I will respond to every comment. … and then every now and again, every month to two months, I will genuinely do like a massive thing on Instagram where I like all the messages that have built up that I may have completely ignored because there's just too many of them. I'll try and go through every single one and even apologise for the reply being so late.

Creators who engage in YouTubing outside of formal workplaces like PHs or MCN structures are, therefore, responsible for performing various tasks which necessitate multiple skills; those tasks range from video production to distribution, business operations and audience building. Due to their total integration in the labour process of YouTubing, this kind of creators are more likely to identify themselves as a YouTuber which emerges as a professional identity formed through performing the wide range of activities described above. It is also evident in this study that most of the independent research participants identify themselves as YouTubers; however, there are other factors affecting how they formalise this as a professional identity which will be addressed in the next section.

Along with the professionalisation of the SME industry, new channels producing entertainment content via a production team are included in the hybrid YouTube space. A part of such content is supplied by PHs which have formed "professional and institutionalised spheres of production which reveal a strong commercial focus" and employ a number of media workers who perform a specialised role set compared to individual creators (Jost, 2017, p. 57). PHs as new generation media companies either belong to MCNs, media entrepreneurs, or creators who have secured a large fan base and have hired a team of supporting creators (Cunningham and Craig, 2019, p. 87). Since PHs mimic the division of labour in traditional television and film production, new media workers who have recognisable job titles similar to those in traditional media production (i.e., managers, producers, production assistants, content editors, directors, video editors) have integrated with YouTube's pro-am labour force. For the

research participants working in PHs, their professional identity is therefore no longer a YouTuber but a title specifying their role in the process of media production.

The PHs where the research participants work are different from one another in terms of size, but they all have a mostly hierarchical division of labour. Turkish participant Barış as the head of video production in PH-4 detailed the division of labour in his workplace:

> You can think of it as in … every corporate company. Of course, there is a hierarchy. For example, right now, I am the video head. There are 2 directors who depend on me, 2 assistant directors who depend on the directors. The editors also depend on me. We have 2 … content generating lines. One is branded content. They are 2 people. We have a brand manager there as well. There is one more person producing content who depends on the brand manager. There are also people who produce content that we call native, not brand. There is an assistant there right now, but normally there will be 3-4 people and they depend on me as well. So, you can think like a white-collar [worker].

While describing the division of labour in PH-4, he associates his role with a white-collar worker in a company, expressing that he works in a hierarchical institutional structure. However, similar to other contemporary media organisations, "in everyday work, jobs, tasks and responsibilities are likely to overlap to some extent" (Deuze, Martin and Allen, 2007, p. 346). Since PHs in the context of this research are small or medium-size companies, "the less available material and human resources are, the more likely it is that a flexible role-taking takes places" (Jost, 2017, p. 57).

For instance, PH-5 in Dublin, before it ceased operations, had a team for video production involving a production manager, a production assistant, 11 producers and contributors who were paid per video. This is how Roisin, the production manager in PH-5, detailed the division of labour in video production:

> If you're a producer, you literally do everything from start to finish in a team environment, but you need to take control of it yourself. So basically, if I was a producer, I'd get the go ahead from myself and … tell the production assistant what props you need. They'd come to us for the budget and then do the casting

> and then they would go in on the day to set up. … So, they've been there for about three hours filming and then they'd … take all the footage off of their SD card and put it onto their computer, wipe it, put the SD card back in for the next producer.

What is notable from Roisin's description is that despite the single title a producer in PH-5 also performs the tasks of a director, a camera operator, a sound recorder as well as a video editor.

Furthermore, Turkish participant Ilgın, the production coordinator in PH-3, described her roles as coordinating all production and post-production processes, organising the director's team for shooting, and integrating brands into video content. She, then, added:

> Even if it is not in my job, in my title, I also script and make designs, but there must also be a designer and a copywriter who does this job. So, in effect, I undertake those things. ... Since we aim to grow [business], it can be said that whoever can do whatever is doing that too right now.

Media workers of PHs multitask to compensate for the lack of resources. This affects the way they imagine the future of their career as they maintain the possibility of shifting between different professional identities. To clarify, this flexible role-taking in the division of labour coupled with multitasking in general shapes their future career prospects and allows wiggle room to move outside YouTube careers or take a different role inside YouTube's creative economy. In the next section, I will elaborate more how the research participants see their own professional identities and how multitasking in the case of both individual creators and those employed by PHs might turn into a risk management strategy for future uncertainties.

Shifting Professional Identities: Making a Media Career Shaped by Expectations and Uncertainties

The industrialisation of SME fuelled by the professionalisation of UGC has created the assumption of a formalisation of professional identity as an influencer (van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021), a social media creator (Cunningham and Craig, 2019), a blogger (Quiggin, 2006), a vlogger (Burgess and Green, 2009a), more specifically a YouTuber

(Burgess and Green, 2018; Lange, 2019) or some other occupational categories such as director, editor, manager, or producer. Contrary to this assumption, I argue that there is a divergence from fixed categories as it is not possible to fix permanently or define conclusively the professional identity as a YouTuber. For some, YouTubing remains a labour of love as they do not actively seek to make a career in YouTube content production. For some others, a YouTubing career could be either "a career in its own right" by securing advertising deals or "a stepping-stone career" through which creators might migrate to other media related jobs ranging from other social media positions to TV and digital marketing roles or create their own production companies (Ashton and Patel, 2018, p. 150).

As part of the SME industry, the research participants coming from a range of backgrounds have slightly different but at times similar identifications with regard to their engagement with YouTube content creation. While all have looked to or are looking to monetise their activity, there are variations in the professional identities they claim. Their self-descriptions include not only YouTuber but also freelance videographer, entrepreneur, manager, content editor, producer, production assistant, and production coordinator. The research participants also work under various types of employment categories including self-professionalised YouTubers, freelancers, company owners/partners and employees. Furthermore, depending on the division of labour in media production, there may be, on the one hand, individual creators, or YouTubers so to speak, who have their own YouTube channels and are partnered with the platform to monetise their creative content. Independent creators are outside of paid employment in formal workplaces; that is, they produce content individually on YouTube without being part of any MCN, talent agency or PH and without having a team of producers. Some participants, on the other hand, are engaged in paid employment in PHs as part of a production team and have recognisable job titles as media workers.

Given this complexity, I suggest taking a closer look into creators' self-descriptions under four subtitles: The first looks at creators who identify their YouTube production with passion and love while not actively seeking to acquire a professional identity of YouTuber. The second investigates creators who aspire to be professional YouTubers. The third examines the narratives of self-professionalised YouTubers. The last section scrutinises the accounts of those working in PHs. Drawing on their accounts, I argue

that creators need to be flexible in order to make a media career on and beyond YouTube which makes it harder to formalise one's professional identity and necessitates shifting between different professional identities as well as employment categories.

"I love doing it": Labour of Love

Some participants describe their practices "as 'non-work' that needs to be supported through 'work' or another source of income" such as paid employment or freelancing since they are unable to monetise adequately their creative outputs on YouTube (Taylor, S., 2018, p. 334). The affective language used by participants such as Aoife, Conor and Oisin in explaining their motivation for YouTubing is in line with other social media creators whose labour also remains mostly uncompensated (Duffy, 2017). They all, however, tried to monetise their content via the YPP, licencing content to a company or external sponsorship deals, which places their media production in commercial relations. They, therefore, engage in hope labour "as un- or under-compensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure" in the hope for future monetisation opportunities (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013, p. 21). Despite the fact that YouTubing remains a labour of love for them, their practices are entangled in complex ways with monetary gain. They, however, do not actively seek to acquire a professional identity as a YouTuber and thereby lack the necessity or obligation to be consistent in YouTubing.

Passion for self-expression and video production is a major theme in the accounts of participants who perform a labour of love, but this theme has also intertwined with commercial motivation. Irish creator Aoife, for example, started to create YouTube videos in 2015 with 2 separate channels, one of which is a collab channel with her best friend focused on a mental health theme. She explained her motivation by saying that "Imagine being able to turn your passion into a job. … It was kind of a thing of like marrying the two things I'm really passionate about. So, video and mental health". Despite her affective commitment to video production, she said "We didn't make big money over YouTube … I suppose in a perfect world I'd love to make money out of it eventually but right now definitely … it's not a job". On her collab channel, some of the videos did well and they signed over a creative license to a company which tried to sell the videos to third parties; however, they were only paid €120 from that

company. Like other aspirational labourers seeking to be compensated one day "either directly or through employment" (Duffy, 2017, p. 50), Aoife added that she started her current full-time job as a content specialist in a digital marketing company thanks to YouTube and explained her role by saying that "I do videography and photography and run social media channels and I do digital marketing. … I think my dream job absolutely involves film". Her YouTube production that started with a passion provided her with a chance to find paid employment, which resulted in turning YouTube production into a second priority. That's why both her channels are not active at the moment despite her ongoing passion to continue.

The intertwining of affective and economic motives is also evident in Conor's account. Conor, who is originally from the Philippines, moved to Ireland in 2011 and started his YouTube channel that same year. His motivation for making YouTube videos is not driven by an economic imperative but rather an affective one:

> It's not a job yet. I don't have like that big of an audience to consider as a job. So … I'm going to create content because I love doing it. … I'm not doing it for the money at the moment. Obviously, when I was starting, I would see these YouTubers saying, I'll just make this amount of money … but creating content with that in mind … loses the purpose because you can't only create content with the motivation of money for so long because you know, it's not guaranteed.

Although his account relies on the notion of love for video-making, he also implies that he had an economic motive at the start. Despite not being able to monetise his YouTube videos, he is a freelance videographer and photographer producing content for brands as well as working part-time at the student union of his university where he produces content for the union's social media account. So, there is a clear association between his current freelance and part-time work and YouTube production; nevertheless, he does not consider the latter as his job as he generates his income from the former two. As there is no guarantee of making money from YouTubing, he does not seek to acquire the professional identity of YouTuber, and YouTube for him is merely a space where he can showcase his work. His career objective is rather to be employed as a content creator by a production company or a creative agency after receiving his degree in Media Studies.

YouTubing also remains a labour of love for Irish creator Oisin as he is not "not actively seeking to turn into a business". He, therefore, described his YouTube production practices not as a job but as a hobby because he generates income via his freelance business:

> I'm an entrepreneur, run my own video production business and I also create content online for social media. … I've been making content since I was 12. First started off making cricket videos with my dad's handycam posting them on YouTube. And over the past 10 years or so, I've just continued to make content on the internet because I really enjoy it.

Rather than becoming a self-professionalised YouTuber, he aims to grow his freelance business; however, he also said "I don't see myself as being a videographer my entire life. … I think the next step after this would be some form of product business, something that's more scalable". Nevertheless, he has secured one sponsorship deal which came up through his friend and was not something that he actively searched for. What is worth noting is that despite describing himself as a hobbyist, he might still consider making a brand deal when there is an opportunity; it is therefore not easy to label his practices in relation to amateurism or hobbyism that falls outside commercial relations.

Aoife, Conor and Oisin have located their professional identity in some form of video or digital content production, but they do not actively seek making a career in relation to YouTube content creation. Despite this, their practices still exist inside the platform economy of SME as they have tried to monetise their creative outputs in different ways. The way they engage in YouTubing, therefore, problematises the conceptualisations of identities such as an amateur and a hobbyist whose activities exist outside of economic relations. Their small monetary gain from YouTubing, however, is not used to define their professional identity. Thus, for some participants, YouTubing remains a labour of love that must be supported by other media work as the main source of income.

Aspiring to be a YouTuber

Passion and love for creating and sharing content on YouTube is also a recurring theme for those who aspire to the professional identity of YouTuber. What makes them

different from those mentioned in the previous section is this specific aspiration. YouTube creators Luke, Barry and Casey interviewed for this project, for example, described YouTubing as a hobby. However, they have a serious commitment to their channels, which contradicts Stebbins' (1980, p. 416; 1992, p. 10) conceptualisation of a hobbyist as one who engages in "a specialised pursuit beyond one's occupation, a pursuit one finds particularly interesting and enjoys doing it because of its durable benefits" but lacks a sense of necessity and obligation. At the time of the interviews, they were more like "pre-professional amateurs" (Stebbins, 1992, p. 47) or "aspiring proto-professionals" (Leadbeater and Miller, 2004, p. 22) who are committed to the activity they love in pursuit of becoming a professional YouTuber. Their creative work, therefore, necessitates engaging in hope labour (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013). While maintaining hope, they also acknowledge the uncertainties of making their media career.

Some creators aim to turn YouTubing into a full-time career and thereby dedicate themselves to their activity. For example, Irish creator Luke has been producing videos for his channel for the past 4 years, but he is also a freelance videographer. He defined his production practices as follows: "YouTube is more of like a hobby that I would love to become a business but for the moment, I use the skills that I have built from YouTube and make videos for businesses". The reason behind his multi-pronged video making career is that he is not able to monetise enough to make a living from only YouTube. He then talked about his career objective:

> I really enjoy like the freelance videography and all that, but really, that's to allow me to survive and to pick up all the gear and skills and equipment that I need to be able to do the YouTube stuff. … So, the career objective is to turn YouTube into a full-time career and then I mean from there I'd like to be as successful at that as possible.

He, therefore, has to split his time between freelancing to survive and YouTubing to become a full-time creator. While he maintains his hope, he also shared his concern:

> My concerns will be that like you just don't … make it. That's the scariest part. I mean, I've been trying this really, really, really hard for last four years or whatever. And, you know, I still haven't made it.

Nevertheless, he is still committed to his channel and tries to put as much of his efforts into it as possible; consequently, trying to situate him solely under the category of a hobbyist would be reductive.

Even when described as a hobby, YouTubing does not necessarily fall outside of creators' current occupations as creators transfer their skills between YouTubing and other media occupations such as freelance videographer. Irish creator Barry, for instance, started to make YouTube when he was 12 years old after getting his first iPhone and switched to his current channel in 2016 after deleting previous ones. He noted that "It is a hobby, but I'm trying to turn it into a job. … If it could be my full-time job, that would be the ideal situation". He is also a freelance videographer and detailed his current job as follows:

> Just funny enough, I do video production. … I'm making video for other people's, say, YouTube channels or Instagram or Facebook, kind of like ads for people … So, I'm not making money from my own videos, but I'm making money off making videos for other people, which is a good way to learn as well.

He, therefore, does not see YouTubing entirely separate from his current freelance job as he claims that his job also helps him to build skills that can be transferable to making YouTube videos. Accordingly, he mentioned his career objective in this way: "I suppose to be self-employed by [producing] content; basically, anything to do with like video production or like photo production … whether it's making YouTube videos or making movies … media basically". Different to Luke, his career plan might go beyond YouTubing in case of failure to become a full-time creator.

Similar to others, Irish creator Casey who is qualified in journalism also considered her YouTube production as a hobby while she had another full-time job:

> For the last few years, I've been making YouTube videos and like more as a hobby. … I haven't been full-time on it and now I'm actually looking to make the move to doing it full time. … Over the years it's grown and … it's given me a lot of opportunity … I've been on TV; I've been asked to produce TV shows and stuff like that. … started out as something fun and then it sort of

> began to grow and I ended up working in it. … So, I suppose it wasn't a conscious decision; it was more something that kind of happened to me.

Since the interview, she made the conscious decision to quit her job and announced in her YouTube video that she is now a full-time content creator. Even if she described YouTubing as a hobby at the time of the interview, she is committed to YouTubing which can be evidenced through her statement: "Because I've been really part time, the biggest challenge for me has been just finding the time. A lot of the time … what suffers is my sleep, I just stay up all night". Although she is now a full-time YouTuber, there is still a degree of uncertainty regarding whether she can generate a liveable income due to the precarious nature of YouTube content production. That is why I chose to include her story under this subheading for, despite a full-time commitment, she is economically still aspiring to achieve professional status. In case of not generating a viable income, she imagines her career path in this way:

> When you are permanent in a job, you're like, 'Okay great. I can be here forever if I want'. That's not the case for YouTube. You don't know if it's going to work out long term because nobody's really done it yet … If YouTube wasn't to work out for me, then I could definitely find something else in a media space. … I'm not that concerned about it because I'm qualified in journalism and I'm a freelance journalist … and a lot of YouTubers as well get opportunities … in TV.

Like Barry, she also considers moving into other media work as she maintains identifying herself as a freelance journalist.

The accounts of research participants described in this section add other dynamics to the complexity of claiming the professional identity of a YouTuber. Some research participants, despite defining themselves as hobbyists, have a strong commitment to YouTubing as they aspire to be self-professionalised YouTubers. They use the skills built in another media career to step into full-time YouTubing or use YouTubing skills to engage in freelance videography as an income source. This might be "articulated as a way to inoculate workers against the uncertainties of the employment economy; cultivating one's skillset across various sectors—and even industries—thus functions as a form of risk management" as Duffy (2017, p. 213) suggests. They, therefore,

acknowledge the risks of potential failure and maintain the possibility of moving between different professional identities. This form of managing future uncertainties is also observable in the accounts of self-professionalised YouTubers and those working in PHs as their possible future jobs go beyond YouTubing.

Self-professionalised YouTubers

In addition to those who engage in YouTubing as a labour of love and those who aspire to the professional identity of YouTuber, some participants are primarily YouTubers who invest all their time into YouTube content creation and thereby describe their production practices in more traditional professional terms. They are self-professionalised YouTubers who are able to secure a large audience base through which they generate a liveable income from the YPP and external brand deals, maintain consistency in content creation, and merge their creative outputs with branded content while maintaining intimate and authentic relations with their followers (Arriagada and Ibáñez, 2020; van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021).

Nevertheless, they are outside of traditional full-time employment relations with a stable income and rely on volatile YouTube income and unstable sponsorship deals (Duffy and Wissinger, 2017, p. 4655). While YouTubing is not immune from the general insecurity of work in the CCIs, there is also an additional dimension stemming from the competitive platform ecosystem which also creates insecurity for the research participants. In other words, their success is not only "bound up with the creation and maintenance of a particular branded persona" but also related to YouTube's place in the competitive platform ecosystem (Duffy and Wissinger, 2017, p. 4663). This uncertainty also shapes how they imagine future of their career. A self-professionalised YouTube creator, therefore, exemplifies "the worker as a self-actualising individual who accepts uncertainty and the requirements to self-manage" in order to "survive in the contemporary circumstances of work and employment" (Taylor, S., 2018, pp. 328-329). Accordingly, creators need to form a "do-it-yourself biography" which Adkins (2014, n.p.) refers to as "a (non-linear) biography which compels creative workers to manage risk individually and to create their own working futures".

Entrepreneurial engagement with media production has been widely acknowledged in the practices of social media creators (Craig, 2019; Duffy, 2017; Duffy and Wissinger, 2017). Turkish creator Elif, for example, started her channel in 2017 when she was a sociology student at university. She told me how she took the decision of becoming a full-time creator after graduating from university in 2019:

> Close to my graduation, I was hesitant if I could get a job, but then I would not be able to … produce as many or better videos as doing this full-time. … That's why I started by taking the risks, thinking like an entrepreneur. I started to support myself afterwards when brands offered me partnerships or with income from YouTube.

Similar to other social media creators, through her "media entrepreneurialism" that requires taking potential risks, she became a pro-am creator with a liveable income source (Burgess and Green, 2009a). Her current career objectives are to appeal to a larger audience and make global brand deals. Since "creative self-employment remains as a financially risky undertaking" (Luckman and Andrew, 2018, p. 20), she also considers the possibility of moving into the advertising industry or digital marketing by transferring the skills she built from YouTubing in case YouTube loses its popularity in the competitive platform ecosystem.

In some cases, this entrepreneurial move might involve getting formalised training to enter into the SME industry. For example, Turkish creator Uğur is a previous Viner and he described how he ended up working as a presenter in PH-1 and formed PH-2:

> I realised that I wanted to be an actor now. I trained in an acting workshop for 2 years. ... I acted in 15 or 17 commercial films. I took part in 2 movies at that time. ... then the YouTube adventure started. ... I've been on YouTube ever since. Now I have my own channel and I concern myself with it.

His content creation on Vine was an amateur engagement, but his formalised training in acting provided him an opportunity to engage in not only film production but also SME. He is now a full-time YouTuber who runs his own PH which also grants him a different identity as a manager responsible for running the PH. Sharing similar concerns about the future of his career, he explained how he prepares himself for an uncertain future:

> Apart from being a YouTuber, I make the necessary investments to be permanent in social media. I mean, I keep the production very well. I work with the best cameras and the best equipment so that I can serve other brands besides my own channel in the future ... because none of us know what will happen tomorrow. So, I want to keep myself safe. I am aware that this is still not a recognised profession in Turkey.

Through investments in high quality equipment and developing technical skills, he tries to build a secure future which necessitates flexibility in moving to other professional identities in different media fields.

Becoming a self-professionalised YouTuber, however, does not necessarily require entrepreneurial engagement at the start. Turkish creator Mert started his channel in 2016 when he was a senior law student at university and continued to produce YouTube videos when he was doing his internship in a law firm. He had no initial intention to be a full-time creator and make money, but he managed to keep a regular uploading schedule which demanded a lot of work while he was also working as a lawyer. He then explained his transition from being a part-time to a full-time YouTuber; the turning point was when he received a paid partnership offer from a language school in return for attending 2-week language school in the UK. When he asked for 2-weeks leave from work, he was fired. He told me what happened afterwards:

> As I showed interest in the channel, that is I devoted my time to the channel, it started to grow. As the channel started to grow, I postponed working … and now I'm doing YouTube as a job and stopped practicing law completely.

He may have been forced into full-time YouTubing as the other income source dried up, but he has no intention to work as a lawyer anymore. For the future of his career, he said:

> To be realistic, I know I will not be making videos on YouTube 5 years from now because YouTube, in other words, the internet changes so quickly. ... I might do a master's degree ... in the field of cinema. I might start working in a place that does business in the digital sector.

The way he imagines his uncertain career future is also tied to the platform's future; he, therefore, maintains the flexibility of moving to another media field or digital industry.

Furthermore, not every self-professionalised creator discards their previous professional identity. Some may maintain an unstable identification with YouTuber as a professional identity such as Turkish creator Deniz who opened her own channel when she was in the last year of university in 2019. At that time, she had an idea that she would occasionally post videos on her channel while working as an architect; this is how she started to be a full-time content creator:

> When I opened my channel, too many people subscribed. I had 100,000 followers. ... Then we shared a video. It was watched incredibly so much; the video was watched more than we expected. Then I started doing this more seriously. I mean I started thinking that I should share weekly videos. Now it has progressed so much that now I have 1 million followers. I continue this because it is going very well. So, I took a break from being an architect.

What is notable in her account is that while she has moved from other profession, there is still an unstable identification with YouTuber as a professional identity. This is partly because she also has similar concerns to other creators:

> My career goal is that I want to progress in this field. Maybe I can think of working with big brands right now. I also consider the negative side of this [job] relating to YouTube in distant future because this is about popularity and popularity is unstable. ... So, architecture is like my somewhat safer area. In the future, I might do something related to that with my earnings from YouTube.

By highlighting the unstable nature of SME, she maintains her attachment to being an architect so that she would be able to reclaim that professional identity if things do not go well on YouTube.

While those who want to acquire the professional identity as a YouTuber also economically aspire to achieve professional status by leaving other paid jobs behind, self-professionalised YouTubers want to maintain or advance their current economic

as well as professional position. As they all accept uncertainty, the way they imagine their future career prospects and how they manage risks individually are aligned together.

"I am not a YouTuber": Professional Identity in PHs

Creators that have been discussed so far tend to identify themselves as YouTubers along with other professional identities depending on their income source or previous work. This is because they are either independent creators who perform all the tasks required to produce, distribute, and promote their content, or creators who have a production team but still are in control of all processes of media production. As opposed to that, some participants working in PHs such as Can, Alp, Barış, Yiğit, Ilgın, and Roisin declared "I am not a YouTuber" or implied this; rather, they tend to identify with their job titles which describe their role in the division of labour in the process of media production. They, therefore, do not have the sole ownership of the YouTube channel for which they produce content. Similar to previous creators though, they also imagine a media career on and beyond YouTube which possibly requires moving from one professional identity to another.

Media entrepreneurialism coupled with passion for creativity and commercial motivation is observable in one research participant's account who professionally engages in YouTubing in a formal workplace. Can, co-partner of PH-1 which was formed by an MCN and 2 entrepreneurs in Turkey, has a degree in business and previously worked in an organisation where he had a chance to meet with his current partner who is among the high-impact internet entrepreneurs in Turkey. Apart from being a company partner, Can is also the manager of PH-1 receiving monthly wages and described his motivations:

> My motivation is to make money like everyone else and I think it is a job I can do. ... I want to do something creative, and I think YouTube is really the extreme point of the definition of creative ... So, you can do what you want, what you dream of and there is no end, but we play it in a very limited area. My motivation actually breaks here because we are a company channel at the end of the day. ... The company's motivation is to make money and make clean, family content so that it can be sold more easily.

For him, becoming a partner to PH-1 is an entrepreneurial move which is also compatible with his ambition of being creative. What makes his account different than most research participants is that he puts priority on economic gain. His ambivalence about future career prospects is, though, similar to other creators. In case he and his partner decide to sell their share, he mentioned that "I don't know my career plan. I want to do something creative, but I don't know what to do", but he keeps his options wide open such as starting his own YouTube channel posting travel vlogs, creating a contest app or platform, and establishing a creator agency. What is worth noting here is that transitioning to a professional identity of YouTuber is among his options although he currently says he is not a YouTuber. Since he also acts as "a showrunner" (his own terms) in the videos and thereby establishes a relationship with the audience due to the flexible role-taking in his workplace, including this as a future career path is understandable even though it somewhat contradicts his current identity.

Similarly, economic motivation also comes to the fore in Turkish participant Alp's account when he described his YouTube production practices. Alp is qualified in journalism and after working 10 years in the field started to work as a content editor in a digital platform. Following a couple of months of unemployment, he started to work in PH-1 as a content editor and identified himself as "a salaried celebrity" who has certain salary and working hours. His celebrity status comes from being one of the faces in videos similar to Can. Other than being a performer, he is responsible for finding content ideas as a content editor. Though he has formal training in journalism, his current role is different than his previous job as content creation on YouTube requires slightly different skills, which blurs the discourse of attributing professional engagement to those who are qualified with skills. As he acquired those skills while working in PH-1, he described his potential career path in this way:

> I guess I will continue with something similar to this [job] since I have no idea what to do next. I either open my own channel or ... I will do something myself from social media such as Instagram etc. My motivation is actually to make money and to be able to do things properly.

Working in a PH which follows a division of labour while maintaining flexible role-taking, therefore, gives him a chance to acquire the professional identity of YouTuber or social media creator in general.

YouTubing in a formal workplace like an MCN also emerges as a media career which can be performed by someone trained in media production like Irish participant Roisin who was working full-time in PH-5 formed by a media entrepreneur. Her role initially was to monitor YouTube channels that are affiliated with PH-5 which was an MCN and check with copyright. Then, she became the production assistant, and later she was promoted to production manager: "The channel just started to grow, and they needed someone to come on board. So, I volunteered because … my degree is in media production". What should be noted here is that while her first position in PH-5 is more like a content editor, she then acquired a new professional identity as a production assistant which was more suitable to her skills acquired through a formal training. While talking about her job, she pointed out the difficulty of finding a job in media sector in Ireland:

> I was very lucky … I don't know if you know the media industry in Ireland. Having a Monday to Friday full-time media job is like unheard of and if you get it, … it's like winning the lottery.

While she worked for an MCN producing content for YouTube, she continued her career beyond YouTube as she moved to another production company but maintained her professional identity as a production manager.

In addition to media entrepreneurialism, professional engagement in YouTubing can also be possible by migrating from traditional media industries. For example, Turkish participant Barış was working in television production without formal training and is currently working in PH-4 as the video head. He talked about his transition from TV to digital production:

> I was writing scripts for TV series before. ... I noticed that producing content on television progresses on a very cumbersome and very slippery ground, and I gave up producing content on television. I therefore switched to digital. I am very happy because of this. When I compare the two, ... I am absolutely sure that digital is both more dynamic and faster and brings more money.

He was able to work as a professional in television industry by eliminating the entry barriers in traditional media industry; his previous work experience was sufficient to qualify him to work in YouTube PHs. Similar to Can and Alp's experience, he also

performs in the videos, and he justified this by saying that “If the person who designs, thinks and produces content in digital [media] does not perform that content, most of the time it does not do a good job”. However, he does not have any intention to acquire a professional identity as YouTuber; rather, his macro career objective is to establish his own production company where he would be able to control all creative processes.

Similar to Barış, Turkish participant Yiğit also worked in various roles in film and advertising industry as an assistant director and a sound operator, but he has a formalised training in cinema and television from university. He said, “I actually got into this business when YouTube Turkey started” in 2014 and he worked in the teams of several popular YouTubers as a content editor, director, and video editor. He started to work regularly as a director in PH-1 and is also working in PH-2. While defining his production practices, he said “I guess it is not an occupation yet, but this is of course my job now. I guess I can call it YouTube producer or something”. His framing of YouTube producer as not a professional occupation is related to Uğur’s point that it is not a widely recognised profession in Turkey. Although he is qualified as a director with formal training, his other professional identity as a YouTube producer in PH-2 required acquisition of a new skillset while on the job. In a sense, while working as below-the-line worker, he was able to transition to the creative side. For his career objective, he said:

> I am thinking of continuing in this area. ... For example, I’ll sign a 5-year contract with someone, I’ll make him/her a YouTuber from scratch. I will grow his/her channel and take 30% of his/her income.

He shares others’ concern regarding the possibility of YouTube losing its popularity, but he believes some other digital media platform would replace YouTube and he will continue to work in SME.

Another Turkish participant Ilgın also moved from performing various roles in film industry to YouTubing. While studying communication design at university, she worked seasonally in various film festivals as a location manager, a technical coordinator, and a production assistant. After graduation, she has been working in PH-3 as a production coordinator for 7 months:

> When they decided to grow the team, I applied directly. They were people I already knew before. … I thought that I would pursue my interest in digital media as well as be concerned with cinema and I applied [for the job].

Although her formal training is not directly related to her current role, she is employed in PH-3 owing to her previous experience and network. Confirming the uncertain future she might face, she said:

> … I want to receive academic training in digital media because this is a very contemporary platform whose dynamics are constantly changing, especially YouTube. ... I am open to work with new platforms. When YouTube is old, I would like to continue doing something new in digital media.

Due to the ever-changing nature of SME, she pays attention to upskilling through formalised training which might benefit her in finding new jobs in media industry.

Overall, those working in formal workplaces like PHs or MCNs describe their practices of YouTubing as a job which generates income, and their professional identities are primarily aligned with their roles in the division of labour. This, however, does not fix their professional status to these pre-defined titles. This is because they may develop various new skills due to flexible role taking in PHs. More importantly, even those engage in YouTubing in formal workplaces share similar concerns with other individual YouTube creators regarding the future of their career. Thus, they also maintain DIY media career development. Looking closely at their work history reveals that most participants referred in this section moved from traditional media roles to YouTubing. Just like their previous experience in other media industries qualified them to get a full-time job in PHs, their experience including new skills development in PHs may also enable another career transition in the opposite direction.

Conclusion

This chapter focused on how the research participants make a media career on and beyond YouTube and drew attention to the diversity in the formation of their professional identities. YouTubing emerges as an activity performed by many people with different educational backgrounds, talent, skills, and motivations. Simply attaching identities such as amateur, hobbyist or professional to those who engage in

such activity would be reductive. Accordingly, the dynamics of YouTube content creation should be examined beyond such distinctions as all creators engage in commercial relations with the platform with affective and/or economic motivations. There are various factors affecting how the research participants describe their practices of YouTubing which range from their motivations to their commitment to their channels, their income sources, and their career goals. All these problematise fixed categories like amateur, hobbyist or professional. Thus, I argued that an identity as a YouTuber is not necessarily linked to generating income or having it as a primary career, and it is possible to maintain one's identity as a YouTuber while having other income generating jobs.

While YouTube content creation has emerged as a profession following the introduction of the YPP and the entrance of MCNs into the field of SME, the platform has assigned a precarious status to its creators. There is, therefore, great instability in the SME industry and particularly in YouTubing that also creates unstable identifications with the participants' practices of YouTubing. Self-managing this uncertainty requires the flexibility to shift between different professional identities as well as types of employment categories. These shifts are not stuck inside YouTube careers, though. YouTubing as an emerging profession in the SME industry has clearly some established ties with more traditional media industries. For some creators, the end goal of their creative practice is to have a career inside the formalised, established media industry and thereby YouTube is a stepping stone; for others, formal media work is the stepping stone to a YouTube career. More importantly, most of them maintain the possibility of moving between inside and outside YouTube careers as a risk management strategy.

The chapter also referred to the different forms of media production on YouTube to highlight both the existence of creators who engage in an individualised media production process and others who partake in a division of labour of media production since the type of media production they engage in affects the way they form their professional identities. YouTubing with a team of creators is mostly overlooked in the existing literature. Focusing on the nature of how work is organised in these contexts provides a valuable perspective on the diversity of professional identities, challenging the assumption of the increasing formalisation of a professional identity as YouTuber or content creator in the SME industry. As those working in PHs do not have the

ownership of YouTube channels for which they create content, their professional identities come from their role in the processes of YouTubing.

Overall, by drawing on the research participants' self-descriptions regarding their media production, the chapter showed a variety in their motivations and identities. There is interesting oscillation between outside YouTube careers and inside ones because of these dynamics. For the research participants, it is therefore not possible to fix permanently or define conclusively the identity of a YouTube creator.

Chapter 5

The Platformisation of Precarity in Social Media Entertainment

Introduction

This chapter looks at how precarity for both Irish and Turkish YouTube creators is rooted in the ways YouTube mediates their labour practices. First, it describes processes which lead to the precarisation of all kinds of work because the precariousness of social media workers as cultural producers in the platform economy is not marginal to the general insecurity of labourers in the capitalist economy. Second, it expounds how precarisation functions in the digital age as the platform economy adds new dynamics to organise work and labour and establishes the theoretical framework which helps to identify the labour practices of research participants as precarious. Then, it discusses the platformisation of precarity which stems particularly from media change in the areas of platform policies and regulations, algorithmic culture, and SME trends. Drawing on Irish and Turkish YouTube creators' experiences, this chapter disentangles how platform specific precarity shapes their labour practices and experience of work. Lastly, the chapter focuses on MCNs as other agents in the SME industry to understand how MCNs are themselves faced with precarity within this competitive media ecosystem as well as how they create precarious working conditions for creators. Based on this exploration, the chapter argues that the precarity narratives of YouTube creators emerge around future related uncertainties similar to those of other social media creators, and creators need to develop risk management strategies to circumvent these uncertainties.

Precarity: An Undesirable Gift from Neoliberalism

Precarity emerges from a trend towards post-Fordist organisation of work and labour coupled with neoliberal economic and governance systems (Ross, 2009, p. 34). In the history of capitalism, the aftermath of World War II (WWII) corresponds to the golden years of capitalism shaped by the effective role of welfare state regimes in Western economies. The post WWII period is characterised by great industrial progress under

Fordism which involves mass production and consumption with stable economic growth, higher wages, and regulatory activities of states to manage capital-labour conflict (Jessop, 2003, p. 253). However, by the end of the 1960s, state-managed welfare economies in the capitalist West had entered a period of dissolution following "a global phase of 'stagflation'[3]" (Harvey, 2005, p. 12). A transition to post-Fordist industrial organisation and neoliberal restructuring of capitalism emerged as a twofold remedy for the reconstruction of the world economy. Post-Fordism refers to a transition from an industry-centric economy to a service-centric one which is "characterised in general by the central role played by knowledge, information, affect, and communication" (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 285). Neoliberal governance structures denote market deregulation, privatisation, labour market flexibility, deindustrialisation, financialisaton (Centeno and Cohen, 2012, p. 319) as well as "the restoration or reconstruction of the power of economic elites" (Harvey, 2005, p. 19).

The process of neoliberalisation, according to Harvey (2005, p. 3), generated "creative destruction" in various areas of economic, political, and social life; one of which took place in the labour market and employment practices and involved "transferring risks and insecurity onto workers and their families" (Standing, 2011, p. 1). The reorganisation of labour markets in tandem with neoliberal governance structures has made workers victims of this process of "creative destruction" and created a global precariat of workers. To explain, the meaning of precarity is rooted in the Latin verb *precor* which denotes "to be forced to beg or pray to keep one's job" (Ross, 2009, p. 34). While maintaining this literal meaning, precarity signifies all forms of insecure, uncertain, vulnerable, unstable, unpredictable conditions of work and life (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018; Precarity Lab, 2019; Ross, 2009; Salustowicz, 2020; Standing, 2011). Thus, it is both an economic condition regarding a person's relation to work but it's also a state of insecurity and uncertainty as the consequences of precarity are not only traceable in work life but also in several non-work domains (Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018, p. 2).

Precarity is experienced globally and, according to Standing (2011), there is even a global class of people called the precariat as those conditions of work have grown

[3] Stagflation – a combination of stagnation and inflation – refers to a situation in which "prices rose in tandem with an economic slowdown and a rise in unemployment" (Centeno and Cohen, 2012, p. 319).

globally. For Ross (2009, p. 6), this global precariat refers to "a multi-class precariat" who are "somehow linked by shared concerns about the insecurity of all aspects of their lives" because, as he states:

> No one, not even those in the traditional professions, can any longer expect a fixed pattern of employment in the course of their lifetime, and they are under more and more pressure to anticipate, and prepare for, a future in which they still will be able to compete in a changing marketplace.

Precarity is, therefore, experienced by different social classes working in various sectors; it is "the new normal, and not just for the young, disadvantaged, or deskilled" (Luckman and Andrew, 2018, p. 37). As Chapter 4 outlined, the research participants in this study come from various backgrounds such as those who have formal training in more established media industries or are self-taught; have different identifications with their practices of YouTubing; work under various types of employment categories including self-professionalised YouTubers, freelancers, company owners/partners and wage-labourers employed by PHs. However, they all experience precarity especially concerning the ways the platform mediates their labour practices. Hence, Irish and Turkish YouTube creators are among this global and multi-class precariat experiencing this new normal as they need to anticipate and make preparations to solve uncertainties within an everchanging and competitive SME industry.

Precarity in the Digital Age

In relation to work, precarity pertains to "all forms of insecure, contingent, flexible work – from illegalized, casualized and temporary employment, to homeworking, piecework and freelancing" (Gill and Pratt, 2008, p. 3). In line with this, the proliferation of platform mediated work within the digital economy has created new forms of waged or unwaged labour practices which deprive workers of protections (Scholz, 2013, pp. 11-12). The precariousness of platform workers who provide services such as deliveries, taxis, and domestic work (Woodcock and Graham, 2020), of those who engage in microwork, clickwork or crowdwork by doing online piecework requiring few skills (Lehdonvirta, 2018; Webster, 2016) and of workers in the digital games industry such as game testers, video game developers and community managers (Bulut, 2015; 2020; Kerr and Kelleher, 2015) have been examined. As part

of the digital economy, content creators in SME also experience such precarity. More particularly, as creative workers in digital media production, they experience "precarious creativity" (Curtin and Sanson, 2016). This is because their work also aligns with the features typically ascribed to creative and cultural work such as non-standard employment with no paid sick leave and pensions, flexibility, long working hours, no fix pay rates, casualised work, the individualisation of responsibility and de-unionisation (Alacovska, 2018; Cross, 2018; Duffy, 2017; 2019; Luckman and Andrew, 2018; McRobbie, 2001; Mäkinen, 2018; Pitts, 2018; Taylor, S., 2018). All these qualities facilitate precarisation of work for content creators who are dependent on their revenue coming from digital platforms, and that which makes them part of a "creative precariat" (de Peuter, 2014).

Precarity in the digital age refers to a double precarity: "a precarity *within* digital media" and "a precarity *through* digital media" (Kergel and Heidkamp, 2017a, p. 5, original emphasis). The former denotes that precarity is reproduced through the way digital media are used; that is, "new technologies re-produce established power structures and therewith economical orders and socio-economic effects like precarity" (Kergel and Heidkamp, 2017b, p. 21). In the context of this research, this highlights the reproduction of precarity *within* digital platforms that mediate cultural production. Absence of fixed pay rates, nonstandard employment patterns and the favouring of advertisers' interests in YouTube's business model; no guarantees of the renewal of sponsorship deals; and the work model of MCNs that are explained in the rest of the chapter exemplify how SME mediated by YouTube and MCNs reproduce precarity. Precarity *through* digital media stems from "an increasingly rapid change of media structured and media-based social practices" which results in "a stable instability" (Kergel and Heidkamp, 2017b, p. 12). In other words, it refers to the impact of media change on labour since such rapid changes bring new social as well as economic practices. Media change in this chapter stands for "serendipitous and minor changes in platform governance, ranging from content sorting and filtering to algorithmic curation" (Nieborg and Poell, 2018, p. 4286). Media change also refers to changes coming from platform and internet governance in a national context and creator-audience relations which affect cultural expression on digital media that will be explained in Chapter 6. This dual lensed approach is, thus, significant for exploring the precarity of content creators in SME and draws attention both to the instability and

insecurity in their work as well as the effects of accelerated media change on their labour practices.

Platformisation of Precarity in the Case of YouTube

Platformed cultural production fundamentally shapes the practices of media workers via the integration of digital platforms' economic models, governmental strategies, and socio-technical infrastructures into media production (Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Nieborg, Poell and Deuze, 2019). YouTube creators' media production practices are shaped and regulated by the platform's regulations, policies, business model as well as its sociotechnical affordances, including its reliance on algorithms. Such platform specific aspects not only affect YouTube creators' labour practices but also how they experience precarity within the ecosystem of cultural production on YouTube. This is because platformisation does not stabilise production practices as platform infrastructures and governance tools are in constant transformation by their parent companies. Being part of a broader trend of acceleration regarding technological developments and specifically media change, YouTube is also in continuous alteration by its parent company Google. This creates contingency in the practices of those who distribute their cultural outputs via such platforms, and therefore contributes to creators' stable instability (Nieborg and Poell, 2018, p. 4278).

Discussions of how precarity or more specifically "algorithmic precarity" is produced by SMPs mostly revolve around the question of content visibility (Duffy, 2020; Duffy *et al.*, 2021). While this remains important and will also be discussed further below, the precarious nature of YouTubing must be examined beyond this concern. This investigation also requires looking at the regulatory framework of YouTube and the (re)formation of entertainment trends. By coining the term platformisation of precarity, I argue that the precarisation of YouTube content creation is very much interrelated with media change in areas such as platform regulations, the algorithmic culture, SME trends, and competitive platform ecosystem. I will elaborate on these four areas respectively to examine how precarity through media change becomes visible in the accounts of YouTube creators.

The Platform Policies and Regulations

The governance strategies of digital platforms constitute one significant aspect of platformisation which shapes the types of creative outputs that can be produced and distributed as well as the organisation, promotion, and monetisation of such outputs (Lange, 2020, p. 58). For platforms, the most visible way of governing their relations with not only users but also other parties such as partners, advertisers and legal institutions is via Terms of Service (ToS) which are "pseudo-legal contracts" (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018, pp. 11-12). YouTube, among others, discursively situates itself as a neutral platform and a mere intermediary, rather than a gatekeeper or curator, within these agents (Gillespie, 2010). Nevertheless, YouTube (n.d.-a; n.d.-g; n.d.-h; n.d.-k; n.d.-l) has developed multiple policies such as community guidelines which define what type of content is allowed and not allowed, copyright which indicates how to comply with copyright laws, and monetisation rules that stipulate how to monetise content as part of the YPP; mobilises content removals to comply with local laws; and sets conditions for advertisers to place ads on YouTube. These policies constrain certain actions and enable others on the use of platforms. They are, however, subject to change as needed because most were created for a particular purpose when platforms were faced with controversial issues for which they were not prepared (Gillespie, 2017, p. 263). Although some changes in YouTube policies and regulations directly affect media production and monetisation practices, creators have little to no say over these regulatory changes, which leaves them at the mercy of the platform. Creators, therefore, need to take necessary measures to manage the uncertainty created by changes in the platform regulations and policies in order to eliminate the major risks of financial precarity.

As mentioned above, YouTube has multiple policies, and there are numerous policy changes in YouTube history. Thus, it is not possible to address them all in this dissertation. Nevertheless, I am going to mention those referred to by the research participants during the interviews to discuss how YouTube's regulatory framework shapes the labour of YouTube creators. Henceforth, I am moving from a macro discussion of the platform's governance policies to a micro discussion of the participant's experiences with some of those regulations and changes in areas such as the YPP, monetisation, and copyright.

YouTube designates the conditions for media production, distribution, and monetisation via the YPP which governs the platform creators who rely on AdSense income (Caplan and Gillespie, 2020, p. 2). The introduction of the YPP was a major step in YouTube history which paved the way for the institutionalisation of YouTube and professionalisation of UGC as scrutinised in Chapter 4. The platform, however, has always been in control of who can and cannot become a partner. After the program was made accessible to a larger segment of creators in 2012, a new eligibility criterion was introduced in 2017. In order to exclude those who do not create original content but copy someone else's content from the YPP, the platform started to require 10,000 lifetime views of a creator's channel (YouTube, 2017a). In 2018, YouTube (2018a) made another change in its YPP setting "the eligibility requirement for monetisation to 4,000 hours of watchtime within the past 12 months and 1,000 subscribers". This change affected one of the research participants living in Ireland. Independent YouTube creator Conor said he is currently unable to monetise his channel as he no longer reaches the threshold level on YouTube:

> Previously, when they didn't have that rule, I was able to monetise my account. Even though I don't get much views, you still get money from it, but you can't really get the money because you have to reach $100 in order for you to cash in the money, which I was way far off.

While YouTube (2017a; 2018a) justified these changes by relying on a discourse of protecting its creator community from "spammers, impersonators, and other bad actors", the platform simultaneously excluded smaller creators producing original content from the YPP.

Creators who are eligible to join the YPP, on the other hand, experience income fluctuation due to the lack of fixed pay rates. To explain, YouTube's business model relies on sharing its advertising revenue with its creators and providing brands an opportunity to display their ads to the platform's users when and where these ads have relevance. Accordingly, how much creators receive depends on how much advertisers pay to YouTube which is calculated by a metric, namely CPM (Cost per mille/Cost per 1,000 impressions). CPM rates fluctuate for various reasons including "time of year", "changes in viewers geography" and "shifts in distribution of available ad

formats" (YouTube, n.d.-e). YouTube (2018b) also explains factors affecting changes in revenue to creators:

> Many factors go into earning money on YouTube like: how many views and how much watch time your videos get, the ad formats you have enabled, what the demographics are of your audience, what device viewers are watching on, and if your content is advertiser friendly. You may see that there are certain months or times of year, when revenue is higher, but all other factors remain constant.

By normalising fluctuations in AdSense revenue, YouTube (2018b) suggests creators adjust their creative choices and uploading schedules based on insight they may gain from analysing those changes.

Independent Irish YouTube creator Casey explained how her AdSense income varied in two different videos depending on audience profile, location and virality:

> [One of my videos] got 700,000 views very quickly ... and I made $3,000 in AdSense … one of the highest CPMs I ever had and again, this is why YouTube is so unpredictable in terms of income because the CPM … changes depending on who the thousand views are. … 98% of the viewers were from America, they were 99% female. … the majority of them were in the 25 to 34 years old age bracket. … they're literally the people that the advertisers want.

She continued with another example which demonstrates the significance of virality to get higher CPMs in AdSense:

> I did a video six years ago that never went viral, but it has 1.4 million views now. … It grew really, really slowly and then over the last six months, it's just sort of picked up attraction out of nowhere. Whereas that video would make me probably €20 a month, like it's not big money. … Your earning potential is bigger if you can get more views in a shorter space of time.

While these two cases are perfect examples of income related insecurity for creators, they also highlight the significance of local factors in precarity such as language. For Irish creators, there is a possibility of attracting a global audience as they make content in English. Turkish creators, on the other hand, appeal to only Turkish speaking

audiences, which localises creators' experiences of precarity, a point that will be discussed further in Chapter 6. For the changes in CPM rates based on the audience profile, Turkish participant Can, the manager of PH-1, gave an example that resembles Casey's experience:

> For example, … on our kids' channel, 10% of the views were from Germany, but 30% of the income was coming from Germany. … Since the CPM is higher there, [you would earn] more for less views.

His case also confirms that getting views from audiences living in countries where the CPM rates are relatively higher increases creators' income. Due to language barriers, Turkish creators are less advantaged as they may only generate international views from countries such as Germany where a large Turkish population lives or Azerbaijan where a language closely related to the Turkish language is spoken. In relation to this, Turkish participant Ilgın working in PH-3 highlighted another instance demonstrating how their channel gets views from other countries as some of their video formats host TV celebrities:

> Our content is watched a lot in the Middle Eastern and South American countries because the Turkish TV series are sold to those countries, and this brings us audience, but they want subtitles of course. ... So, we may do this for those fans but it's not something we do right now.

Her case points out how they may benefit from the global viewership of Turkish TV series due to a great size of international sales (Bhutto, 2019). However, they need to invest money and time for the creation of professional subtitles which in turn does not guarantee compensation in the context of media change.

The YouTube creator economy's dependence on advertising revenue has also brought about some changes in platform regulations and policies. Despite YouTube's reluctance to police content in order to maintain its neutral position and to avoid liability (Gillespie, 2017), the platform has been chivvied into action not only by U.S. governmental authorities and their users but also by advertisers who do not want to place their ads on harmful content (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018, p. 148). In the aftermath of a couple of news stories reporting the placement of ads on extremist YouTube content in 2017, major companies revolted against the platform by declaring

their plans to freeze or withdraw ads (Kumar, 2019, p. 2). Within only a few weeks, YouTube lost millions in ad revenue (Solon 2017). Thus, the platform began to take more responsibility for policing content, governing user activities and adjusting platform policies in line with the conservative demands of legal agents and advertisers. The immediate response of the platform to mitigate the risk of major income loss was to implement a tight regime of content moderation mostly based on algorithmic decision making. This resulted in "a high number of arbitrary sanctions, channel shutdowns and income loss" on the part of creators (Niebler and Kern, 2020, p. 4). This conflict between advertisers and the platform, named the Adpocalypse within the YouTube creator community, made the vulnerable position of creators more apparent. The way the platform handled this conflict revolved around a controversial policy change in which "YouTube re-negotiated and re-defined who counts as a partner, what content was acceptable for advertisers, or how the rules and decisions were conveyed" (Caplan and Gillespie, 2020, p. 4). All these measures, however, substantially signal the asymmetrical power relations between the platform, advertisers, and creators and demonstrate how YouTube prioritises advertisers over creators when tweaking its policies (Kumar, 2019, p. 4). The above-mentioned changes in the YPP are also rooted in this strategic approach of the platform.

To discuss further how some policy changes may affect creators' income, I would like to describe a specific case mentioned in one of the interviews. One example where YouTube could not avoid liability is the use of children's data for personalised ads and content recommendations via commercial surveillance of children's on platform activities (Smith and Shade, 2018). In 2019, YouTube had to pay a total of US$170 million fines to the U.S. Federal Trade Commission and New York Attorney General for violating the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) Rule by collecting children's data without parental consent (Federal Trade Commission, 2019). In order to avoid another monetary penalty, in January 2020 YouTube publicly announced new measures including "more clear communication with parents, highlighting and promoting that only YouTube Kids is safe for unsupervised navigation, new ways to identify videos made for children, such as classification of all published videos by creators and machine learning" (Ferreira and Agante, 2020, p. 45). This also brought in further measures such as disabling targeted ads on children's

content, resulting in a loss of Google AdSense revenues for some creators. Turkish participant Can, the manager of PH-1, mentioned that:

> We had a children's channel that we grew for 5 years. In fact, a very good part of the company's income came from this channel, but YouTube has recently changed [its policies]. ... They are now removing or reducing targeted advertising on children's channels starting from 2020. So, there will be a huge loss of income. ... That's why ... we are looking for different content to replace this loss.

Therefore, this new rule has had significant impact on at least one of the PHs researched for this project, resulting in lost revenue.

Another controversial issue in YouTube's history which challenges the platform's intention of being neutral is copyright infringements. Even though digital platforms have been granted safe harbour status under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) which criminalises content creators before platforms in negotiating with copyright holders, after adopting YouTube, Google found itself in the midst of copyright wars (Miller, 2009, p. 427). Numerous lawsuits were filed against the company due to copyright and intellectual property violations (van Dijck, 2013a, p. 120) such as the case where Viacom accused YouTube of profiting from copyright infringing content in 2007 (McDonald, 2009, p. 401; Wasko and Erickson, 2009, p. 379). Although the platform has made adjustments following a vast number of lawsuits and prioritised monetising original content (Hou, 2019, p. 538), "YouTube's relationship to the copyright industries has been characterised by both concord and conflict" (McDonald, 2009, p. 396). In order to abide by external copyright regulations, in 2007 YouTube introduced "complex automation mechanisms like Content ID, which matches uploaded content against a database of copyrighted material" (Burgess and Green, 2018, p. 48). Content ID which was designed to flag any video that uses copyrighted material has certainly been beneficial to YouTube and commercial copyright holders who are able to generate revenue from creators' work or to remove their content; however, it presented new challenges on the part of content creators because it failed to protect their rights (Solomon, 2015). This became clear from the uncertainty experienced by YouTube creators in this project regarding fair

use and false copyright claims. To make this more explicit, I will delineate a couple of cases highlighting the experiences of some research participants in these matters.

YouTube allows fair use of copyrighted content, but the definition of fair use is very slippery and varies depending on context. Reliance on an automatic flagging system which fails to detect fair use and often flags non-infringing videos as if they are contravening guidelines adds one more facet to the precariousness of creators' work (Solomon, 2015, p. 255). For example, Independent Turkish YouTube creator Mert explained how he had to re-edit his video after it was flagged as copyright infringing though he tried to trick Content ID:

> ... Warner Bros. licensed visual materials are very tightly protected. ... I have made a video recently ... I added a 50-second video, not even 1 minute, into [my] video ... the video was blocked from the world and ... I tried every way not to be noticed by YouTube. I mirrored the video, I made it smaller, I added to the background, I added subtitles, but still the video was noticed and blocked. I had to remove that part from the video.

In some cases, however, he intentionally uses copyrighted material:

> [Sometimes] I am obsessed with a song, and I say I must use this song in this video, but the song is copyrighted, and I cannot earn income from the video. The income is earned by the copyright holder. If the video is a very important one for me, if I think it is very compatible with the song which happens in rare but important videos, I sacrifice that video over not making money because a good video is more important to me.

In this situation, due to the inclusion of a copyrighted song in the background, he is not entitled to monetise his video even though his video content is original. It is worth noting that the right to monetise creators' videos that contain even a portion of copyrighted content belongs to the commercial copyright holders. According to Solomon (2015, p. 255), this regulation deprives creators of their rights to gain financial benefit from their original material "because that monetisation is not proportional to the amount of copyrighted content used in the video". Thus, in addition to the inability of detecting fair use, creators' right to monetise their original content is also revoked in favour of big media conglomerates.

To better protect copyright owners, YouTube also allows them to flag videos for infringement that have not been automatically detected by Content ID. In the case of manual claims, creators do not "have knowledge of who is claiming content in their videos, where it appears, and what they can do about it" (YouTube, 2019f). In July 2019, YouTube (2019f) nonetheless tweaked its policy about manual Content ID claims which now requires copyright owners to indicate timestamps in which their content shows up. In this way, creators are able to edit their videos to mute or replace the audio being claimed or trim out the claimed content by using editing tools in Creator Studio. A month later, to address the issue of transferring all revenue from creators to copyright holders, YouTube (2019g) disallowed copyright owners to monetise "creator videos with very short or unintentional uses of music" but reserved the right to "prevent monetisation or block the video from being viewed". Independent Irish creator Casey described a case where one of her videos was blocked:

> I had one issue where a copyright holder locked my wedding video in 59 countries, which is very frustrating and unfortunately, there's nothing I can do about that.

In reference to these changes, she also mentioned how she is displeased with this situation though she understands the background of these changes:

> YouTube changed their rules recently in that because people were abusing the copyright system and they were claiming videos that for tiny tiny amounts of music, and then they would collect all of the AdSense from that like 20-minute video. So, YouTube changed the rules recently to say that … you can't take the money from the video, but you can block the video and that was supposed to discourage big companies from abusing this system, but it's a bit annoying. I don't know if it's the best solution to be honest.

In addition to formal regulations, there might be glitches within automation systems; an example of which is invalid copyright claims which also contribute to the platformisation of precarity. In 2012, YouTube introduced certain upgrades for Content ID such as "the smarter detection of unintentional claims" which "involves new algorithms to detect potentially invalid claims that are then put in a queue to be manually reviewed by the content owner" (Solomon, 2015, p. 257). Despite this,

problems arising from the automated flagging system continued to occur. Turkish participant Ilgın, the production coordinator of PH-3, for instance, mentioned that one of their videos was removed by YouTube from the channel for which she works due to an invalid copyright claim:

> When your guest is a celebrity, this becomes a content for a magazine channel as well. … Our video was broadcast by a national [TV] channel and … they uploaded their program which contains our program to YouTube. Then, YouTube somehow removed our video by stating that we use … this video of that national [TV] channel without permission, and this was a sponsored video.

Although creators have a right to dispute a Content ID claim which is misidentified by a non-human actor, resolving such a problem might take time. In the meantime, creators' relations with their sponsors might be imperilled as the removed video may be sponsored by a brand, like in Ilgın's case. Later in the conversation, when I asked her the major changes she perceived in her life after starting this job, she said:

> We have to be online for 24 hours, especially me, because I am the one who uploads the content … and the one who … will contact and solve it when there is a copyright problem. So, if our YouTube video was removed at 12 o'clock at night, and it's a sponsored video and it has to be visible at that time, then I have to be online too.

The imperfection of Content ID system is, therefore, a source of precariousness, affecting creators' streaming schedule and also working hours.

Algorithmic Culture

YouTube's reliance on non-human actors is not limited to the specific practices of content identification and monetisation. Cultural intermediation on YouTube is also run through a non-human actor namely an algorithm which curates online content based on digital footprints of the platform users (Hutchinson, 2017, pp. 201-202). Such software infrastructures of platformisation pave the way for the production of "algorithmic culture" in creator practices (Bucher, 2012; Hutchinson, 2017; Roberge and Seyfert, 2016; Striphas, 2015). As Cunningham and Craig (2019, p. 75) have indicated, such algorithmic culture has mostly been addressed as a form of control

rather than its relation to precarity. Bucher (2012), for instance, has scrutinised the role of algorithms as disciplinary apparatuses which determine what gains visibility for creators and content on the platform; she has underscored that their disciplinary characteristic stems from the "threat of invisibility". However, the threat of invisibility is also tied to precarity since it has financial (Petre, Duffy and Hund, 2019, p. 2) as well as emotional consequences for creators (Bishop, 2019, p. 2591). It is, therefore, important to highlight that algorithmic decision-making in relation to quantifying self and audience generates a high degree of uncertainty for the productive labour practices of content creators in SME.

To understand how YouTube creators interact with the platform algorithm referring to "the codified step-by-step processes" (Bishop, 2020, p. 2590), it is more important to examine these invisible platform infrastructures "as configurations in situated practices" (Bucher, 2018, p. 63). In other words, the focus should be on what algorithms do rather than what they are. On YouTube, algorithms situated in the practices of media production, distribution and consumption do afford or restrict visibility (Bishop, 2019; 2020). However, there is a lack of transparency regarding why the algorithm boosts some content over others (Bishop, 2019; Gillespie, 2015). Additionally, the platform constantly changes its algorithm, relying on the discourse of improving user experience to justify these changes. This changeable nature coupled with its non-transparency gives an unknowable character to the algorithm. This has been criticised for creating structural inequality impacting some creators due to their age, race, and gender (Bliss, 2020; Carman, 2020; Glatt, 2022; Noble, 2018; Sobande, 2020), and is also a factor in precarity in the experiences of all creators.

Visibility has always been a vital issue in the media industry. Factors determining what is visible and invisible in media range from technical aspects of production such as the use of camera and editing in film and TV (Thompson, 2005), editorial decisions in the press (Bucher, 2012), audience ratings affecting content decisions (Teurlings, 2013) and cultural politics of the state restricting the visibility of marginalised identities (Kerrigan, 2021; Yesil, 2016). Visibility on the internet is, though, defined algorithmically; that is, what is visible and invisible became a matter of software to a great extent (Bucher, 2012, p. 1166). On YouTube, visibility comes from being ranked highly in search and recommendation lists. In more detail, the algorithmic culture of

YouTube forms a complex recommendation system which not only takes the number of video views but also "likes, dislikes, surveys, and time well spent" into consideration (YouTube, 2019a). The platform provides users with a list of suggested videos that includes other related videos and is personalised based on the viewer's watch history; lists a number of videos on the home page that are selected based on not only the viewer's search and watch history but also the performance of the videos; ranks viral videos in the Trending feed by combining "popularity with novelty"; and displays recently uploaded or highlighted videos from the channels to which the viewer subscribed in the Subscriptions tab (YouTube, 2019e). As any video content's visibility on YouTube is determined by its algorithm and creators rely on Google AdSense revenue which is inherently tied to the number of viewed videos and subscribers, this creates financial precarity for YouTube creators. Thus, creators, or influencers, perform "visibility labour" that is the work of presenting their online self-portrayal as attention grabbing (Abidin, 2016, p. 5). This is, however, strictly tied to algorithmic visibility within the ecology of social media production. Creators, therefore, need to play "the visibility game" by building knowledge of the platform's algorithm and generate tactics to attain visibility (Bishop 2019; Cotter, 2019, pp. 899-900).

One way to attain visibility is to develop a larger and perhaps an international audience and this is tied to making content with global appeal (YouTube, 2019d). Earlier in the chapter, I mentioned the significance of developing an international audience for increasing AdSense income considering the variations in the CPM rates. Although Irish creators might have an advantage in that due to language, this is certainly not an easy task as most of the Irish creators interviewed for this project could not achieve this kind of global reach. Independent Irish creator Casey, who had successfully attracted the attention of a wider American audience, said:

> I actually just built by accident. I was making so many videos about Irish people and Irish things, and they were actually made for Irish people. And it just turned out that a lot of Americans are really, really interested in content about Ireland. … Then, I probably built a bit more because I started to talk about more worldwide issues as well. So, I did a few videos on Trump. … I probably also have a benefit in that, like, my accent isn't too thick to

> understand, you know? So, I think that's probably … helped me build up an American following because they can actually understand what I'm saying.

While her point about her unplanned success in building an international audience alludes to the unknowability of the algorithm, the strategic content choices she made later demonstrates her agency in maintaining the attention of her audience on her channel.

For independent YouTube creator Barry, on the other hand, 90% of his audience are Irish. He explained this outcome in relation to making Irish relatable content that contains "inside jokes about Ireland" or local trends, but he said he has recently changed his strategy "to go for more international audience" by making more general content and jokes. Apart from the issue of making content with global appeal, Barry explained the role of the algorithm in getting more Irish audience:

> The algorithm obviously like location wise would put you into the Irish homepage … If I start to make videos about America, I'd say I might start to get more American [audience] because YouTube is like "Oh, this is for American people, put [it on their page]". I think the algorithm just puts you where you are. Especially like if you're putting Irish in the title, Irish in the tags, … people [commented on your video] … are Irish … Then they're like "Oh, this is an Irish creator, well put him to Irish people.

Thinking in parallel with Barry's point, independent Irish creator Luke also thinks that a YouTube channel's location has an effect on the algorithm and thereby determines the audience profile. That is why he changed his channel's location as part of the visibility game:

> So, I changed it to the United States a couple of months ago as an experiment. … I thought that may have changed something in the algorithm to say "Hey … don't just show this to Irish people, try to show this to American people". As soon as I did that, … the next video that I did had more mass appeal and it was more American audience … that actually went semi-viral. But ever since then not much of a change. … that was me trying to figure out the algorithm a bit more. But if I'm to really dig into my analytics, YouTube simply just seems to show my videos to Irish people, and I don't know how to get out of that.

Due to the mysteries of algorithms, creators may make calculated decisions in producing content with mass appeal like Casey and Barry or try to build knowledge of the algorithm through trial and error like Luke. They may not necessarily be successful though.

Part of the visibility game is to create attention grabbing titles and thumbnails and to change them if the uploaded videos are not performing well after checking the channel statistics. In one of the Creator Academy lessons, YouTube (2019c) also stresses the significance of titles and thumbnails to increase discoverability on the platform and suggest creators design thumbnails that accurately represent the video content, to write "catchy titles", and to make them all advertiser friendly. Based on his understanding, Turkish participant Yiğit explained how the YouTube algorithm works in relation to thumbnails:

> YouTube shows a thumbnail to 100 people. If you drive [people] to click into this thumbnail, YouTube promotes you a little more. However, people clicked into it, and it was clickbait, and thereby they did not stay to watch through, YouTube embeds this video at the bottom of [the recommendation list].

For creators, therefore, the design of thumbnails is important in that the research participants mentioned they needed to build photoshop skills to make more appealing thumbnails. Also, they describe playing around with different strategies to get more video views.

While talking about his strategies to increase his video views, independent Irish creator Luke mentioned a case where he made a fake hate video about a popular YouTube creator:

> I tricked half a million people to click into that video, but within the first 30 seconds, they realise "Oh, I've been tricked, but in a good way". … that worked really well. The only problem is [that] it can only really work once because you can't keep tricking people. … I got about 10,000 subscribers just off that one video. But the problem was I still got a lot of hate for it for let's say the people who didn't understand the video, or like just saw the title and thumbnail clicked in, disliked it or whatever. And that sort of bit me in the ass because then that made YouTube think that this is not a satisfying video for the viewers,

> because they're not actually even watching it. … So, I think that actually may have … not helped me in the future.

Although this strategy worked out in gaining a large number of video views and subscribers, clickbait content has its own downsides in terms of not only receiving hateful comments and negative feedback from the audience but also misleading the algorithm.

Another strategy is to change titles and thumbnails if the video is not performing well. This necessitates utilising the channel statistics which provides creators' watch time and interaction reports (YouTube, 2019b). For example, independent Turkish creator Mert talked about how this strategy worked out for him:

> I posted my last video 2 days and 3 hours ago and it was ranked 3rd among the last 10 videos I posted. This is satisfying for me. If it is in the 8th place, for example, I would definitely change the title and the thumbnail of the video. I believe this is very effective. I made a vlog when I was in England ... and the video was not watched. I immediately changed the thumbnail and the title. That video, for instance, was watched 2-3 times more than the vlogs I filmed usually.

He, therefore, prepares 2 thumbnails for his videos in case he needs to change, and asks his friends' opinion on both alternatives to see which one they would watch. In a similar way, independent Irish creator Casey also pointed out the significance of this strategy:

> There's an awful lot of time spent on what I like to call a YouTube admin. So, you go back through your old videos, you update their titles if they're not performing; you update their tags. The more you learn about how to optimise video on YouTube, you have to go back, and you need to apply those learnings to your old videos because otherwise, they're just like dead real estate on your channel. I spend a lot of time going back if the video I think is underperforming, I look at it, I'm like titles are okay, do I need to change the thumbnail or description; … do I need to update thumbnail in particular and I play around with different strategies there.

Their labour process, therefore, does not end once they upload the video to YouTube; they need to check the performance of their videos and make changes if necessary. This demonstrates that creators not only perform creative and technical tasks but also promotional tasks. In other words, part of their job includes the business operations to optimise the unpredictable YouTube algorithmic monetisation system.

The inherent unknowability of the algorithm manifests itself in the creators' accounts and their strategies for playing the visibility game through trial and error. The ways of producing knowledge about the platform algorithm, however, not only come from their individual experiences. They also build such knowledge collectively through "algorithmic gossip" as they chat with other creators and discuss in creator forums (Bishop, 2019, p. 2590). Based on his knowledge built through experiences of other creators, independent Turkish creator Mert believes that maintaining a consistent upload schedule is important to attain algorithmic visibility:

> I think the algorithm is effective in continuity. I know that if I do not upload videos to YouTube for 5 months, YouTube will not recommend me at the end of the 5th month. I ran into these examples a lot. A few of my friends stopped uploading videos for a few months for some reason, and when they come back, YouTube does not recommend their videos and their videos are not watched but for example I came across a completely contradictory example of this. A friend of mine … did not upload any video for 6 months, then she uploaded, and her videos continue to be watched. So, the commitment of the audience to you can avert the algorithm in some cases, but in exceptional cases. … That is something I am afraid of.

Similar to Mert, the threat of disappearing is also evident in the account of independent Turkish creator Elif who tries not to interrupt her regular upload schedule:

> Actually, there is nothing explained by YouTube as we punish you if you do not upload regularly but I do think that it affects the algorithm. Although they do not explain, I observe myself that [the videos] appear on the homepage and are watched more when I upload regularly. … So, if they did not upload videos for 2 weeks, people are trying to come back with a very striking video. … House tour of celebrities or big YouTubers, for example, is a matter of curiosity

> for [the audience]. In that case, she needs to show her house or tell why she left her boyfriend, or she has to do Q&A and write a stunning headline like 'What is my religion?' so that people click.

Hence, both creators try to upload new content regularly due to their belief that an uninterrupted flow of video sharing is something favoured by the algorithm. This, however, might be challenging. Independent Irish creator Oisin, for example, described the major challenge he experienced so far as being consistent and making really good content, but he said he overcomes this challenge "by just doing it". For him, the reason for being consistent in video uploads is related to building a good relationship with his audience:

> Because you need people to come back to your channel. So, they expect content at a certain time from you and also to just build up that relationship with your audience as time goes on. Because if you're in and out, then … you're not going to have as good of a relationship with them.

On the one hand, creators believe the idea that the YouTube algorithm expects consistency in uploads and the failure to do so may result in invisibility. Their accounts, on the other hand, also underscore the significance of relational labour (Baym, 2015) since maintaining good relations with audiences or identifying content ideas which attract enough audience attention might help them to return after a period of break. Confirming this, the Creator Academy, in explaining how YouTube search and discovery works, also suggests in a YouTube video that "get the audience to like your videos" as a way to get the algorithm to like creators' videos since "the algorithm follows the audience" (YouTube Creators, 2017).

Not taking a break from this continuous media production might result in what Lange (2020, p. 52) calls "algorhythmia" which refers to "a condition in which the needs, abilities, and pacing of human creators are out of sync with the evaluations, assessments, and metrics of automated systems that are used to determine participatory parameters and profitability in commercialised, interactive, media-sharing environments". Turkish participant Barış, the video head in PH-4, explained how this incessant cycle of new content creation affects him:

> Like all creatives, you are running out of [ideas], experiencing writer's block, getting tired, getting exhausted by time. You are alienated from your work at some point for doing mass and commercial production. … You want to rest but of course you are getting exhausted very much since you do not have such a time and energy, since you had to be professional. I mean a singer, or a director can rest for 1 year, but we do not have such a chance.

In order to catch up the accelerated change coming with the algorithmic culture, Barış's comments also highlights the necessity of not breaking the cycle of production despite exhaustion and creative blocks.

Furthermore, the mystery of the algorithm creates, as Bucher (2017, p. 31) calls it, "the algorithmic imaginary" that is "the way in which people imagine, perceive and experience algorithms and what these imaginations make possible". The non-transparency of the platform's algorithmic logics is what paves the way for algorithmic imaginaries and is something that poses uncertainty for creators (Bishop, 2019; Bishop, 2020). Turkish creator Alp, a content editor in PH-1, explained this uncertainty drawing on his algorithmic imaginary:

> YouTube's algorithm … is something like God. There is a God there. We know it wants something. We know it likes some things. We know it does not like some things, but we are not quite sure why. It chooses some of your content. … It constantly promotes you. … One day it gives up on you. … You are an old celebrity now. … So, there is always such a decline. Not everything is under our control.

The channels for which Alp creates content were opened in 2014 and have grown organically since then with a high degree of visibility provided by the YouTube algorithm because, as his co-creator Can explains, YouTube promoted their channels as there was not an abundance of Turkish content at that time. Although they were promoted by the platform in growing their channels and becoming celebrities, they are very aware of the high degree of uncertainty about their future and success of their channels regardless of their current efforts. Turkish participant Yiğit, a director in PH-1 and a production manager in PH-2, also mentioned his concerns about changes in the platform's algorithm:

> [YouTube's algorithm] is constantly changing. … It is a very negative thing because there is nothing constant in my job. … I am working in such a platform that the platform is constantly changing. It is like a joke. The platform itself is changing. How can I be the most watched one in that platform?

Despite their quantified success as evidenced through their position on top channels lists in Turkey, this does not guarantee stable success and thereby does not end their concerns about the future of their career.

Since algorithmic invisibility plays a substantial role in decreasing AdSense revenue, creators have also begun to engage with non-scalable ways of earning income such as "brand deals, merchandising, television and cable options, live appearances, and licensing content" (Cunningham and Craig, 2019, p. 77). However, even in the case of brand deals which is the most popular revenue creation option among the research participants, visibility still remains an important issue because creators might guarantee a certain number of video views to brands. Can, for example, mentioned that his company guarantees 500K video views to potential partners. The channel for which Yiğit works also relies on the high number of video views like 1 to 4 million views in brand deals.

Trend Changes in SME

The algorithmic culture not only determines content recommendations for users but also calculates what is trending on the platform (Gillespie, 2014, p. 167). As part of visibility labour, creators try to be responsive to such trends while producing new videos since gaining visibility in the algorithmic culture is dependent on content being searchable, clickable, and recommendable (Bishop, 2018b, p. 95). The algorithmic logic of the platform, therefore, has an effect on video content, genres, video lengths, titles and thumbnails (Bishop, 2020, p. 3) as creators adjust their strategies for producing and distributing their cultural outputs based on their interpretations of such logic (Nieborg and Poell, 2018, p. 4280). Accordingly, the creative outputs of YouTube creators turn out to be "contingent commodities" that are "increasingly modular in design and continuously reworked and repackaged, informed by datafied user feedback" (Nieborg and Poell, 2018, p. 4275). As a result of such algorithmic change and the visibility labour performed by creators to grab attention, online video

entertainment trends exist in a state of constant flux. Rapid changes in SME trends, specifically YouTube trends, become an additional dynamic contributing to the platform specific precarity through media change.

SME trends can be explored in various ways on YouTube. In 2015, the platform introduced a trending tab which gives users a non-personalised list of viral videos. This list might include any video which could be uploaded a couple of hours ago or even 2 weeks ago, and is updated approximately every 15 minutes (YouTube, n.d.-d). The trending tab on YouTube also demonstrates localised trends depending on users' selected locations. Secondly, YouTube has a Culture & Trends division that is responsible for understanding emerging entertainment trends; YouTube trends can be discovered on the YouTube (n.d.-c) Culture & Trends blog which posts facts and figures on trending topics and contextualises them by explaining why certain topics are trending as well as noting key creators and videos on such topics. Another way of exploring SME trends is to look at the Google Trends (n.d.) page which provides data on YouTube Search Trends to learn popular search terms and topics or search queries that are on the rise.

It should be highlighted that those trends are not simply formed via dictates from media industries, audience expectations or creators' taste. Rather, those trends emanate from "ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture" in the convergence culture where old and new media are blended (Jenkins, 2006, p. 243) as well as the platform's algorithmic curation of users' digital traces. SME trends have been examined mostly in reference to popularity (Burgess and Green, 2009a; 2018; Kruitbosch, 2008) and virality of videos (Asur, 2011; Broxton, 2013; Burgess, 2008; Cheng, 2007; Khan and Vong, 2014; Reed, Elvers and Srinivasan, 2011; Weaver, Zelenkauskaite and Samson, 2012; Zhang, Zhao and Xu, 2016). Popularity has been measured by different categories (i.e., most viewed, most responded, most discussed, top rated, most favourited, previously popular, and most active) that also indicate how YouTube shapes popularity through various metrics of audience engagement (Burgess and Green, 2009a). In the earlier stages, the platform channelled its users to popular content on the whole platform without personalising or localising search results; so, "there was far less automated curation of content" (Burgess and Green, 2018, p. 61). Later, YouTube transformed its interface by removing these early categories of popularity and introducing a more complex and

personalised recommendation algorithm and placing an emphasis on channels and subscribers instead of individual videos (Burgess and Green, 2018, p. 59).

A viral video, on the other hand, refers not only to popularity, but also to "something that achieves popularity by rapidly gaining velocity through a temporary and disorganized network" (Allocca, 2018, n.p.). As a product of participatory culture, it has a potential to "attract active, participatory and creative engagement from other participants" (Burgess, 2008, p. 103). Henceforth, it plays a role in establishing SME trends since creators produce videos similar to viral ones to gain visibility. An important aspect contributing to rapid changes in SME trends is that the possibility of going viral is reduced with the content's aging process because it loses its spreadability over time (Khan and Vong, 2014, p. 642). Thus, any viral video's life span is quite short (Broxton, 2013; Cheng, 2007). As Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013, p. 1) put it, "if it doesn't spread, it's dead"; if it's dead, there is another emerging trend.

When referring to trends that are rapidly changing, Turkish participant Alp, a content editor in PH-1, highlighted how audience expectations play a part in those changes:

> The audience may find our content old or outdated because the content … is getting old really fast. … If we shot a video with this set-up 3 months ago [He was showing me a set-up in the office], … it would be watched by 1 million. We could not somehow put it into the filming schedule. … It will remain at 400,000, for example.

Digital content creation, therefore, requires being up to date in terms of catching topics that attract audience attention most at a particular time and being quick in producing video on that topic. If creators miss the right moment, the content they produce might lose its spreadability as it would not be searched for and shared by audiences.

Just as trends have a temporal dimension as they start to rise and go into a decline after a while, there are also spatial dynamics of SME trends (Zhang, Zhao and Xu, 2016). This spatiality of trends is, on the one hand, evident in YouTube's localised trending tab. On the other hand, local events in the offline world affect emerging trend topics in online platforms (Reed, Elvers and Srinivasan, 2011). Independent Irish creator Barry, for example, mentioned Longitude Festival which is an outdoor music festival

taking place during July every year in Dublin and why he makes videos about this event:

> It's … a great way to get views for lots of people [attend the festival] every year. … That's like my main thing every year. I make a Longitude video because I know that the people are going along with me are going to watch it. There's an audience of like 50,000 to 100,000 people there. So, that's a good way to follow trends I suppose.

Likewise, events experienced globally such as the Covid-19 pandemic shape online entertainment trends. Specific to YouTube, there has been an increase in the production and consumption of certain video content during the pandemic that ranges from cooking to home workouts, from how-to genres to religious services (YouTube, n.d.-f). In relation to this, independent Turkish creator Elif mentioned that her old videos in the how-to genre began to get more views during the national lockdown period that started in March 2020. Since "persistence" which signifies "the durability of online expressions and content" is one of the affordances of digital platforms (boyd, 2014, p. 11), creators might benefit from their old content attracting audience attention again for some reason. Though this may not result in a substantial increase in AdSense income as virality is typically only achieved when the content is new, creators have the ability to adapt their content in new videos to get more attention.

Moreover, the emergence of trends might also be explained by scrutinising the interplay between local or global dynamics. This is because SMPs accelerate "the spread of trends beyond national borders" due to the increased accessibility of digital media produced in other countries (Google, 2019). Gina Shalavi who works in the department of Video Marketing at Google writes about 3 cultural shifts that are observable in the 2019 YouTube Trends; one of which is about how local content can go global (Google, 2019). To exemplify this, Shalavi refers to the global spread of the content produced in the U.S. and thereby how creators in the U.S. affect trends in other countries. In that case, the role of creators in the formation of SME trends is worth mentioning. Allocca (2018), the Head of Culture & Trends at YouTube, mentions that content creators who build a large audience base become "tastemakers" or trendsetters. How emerging trends set by U.S. creators affect practices of creators in Turkey is

observable in their accounts of their labour. Turkish participant Alp, a content editor in PH-1, explained how trends are created:

> These big YouTubers set trends. Trends in Turkey are set by those abroad. There is a guy called Mr. Beast. … Whatever he does is done here next week.

Accordingly, following trendsetters not only in the U.S. but also in countries such as Russia and Japan is one of Alp's daily tasks in the office.

A more specific instance that demonstrates how some trends go global is Vlogmas. A U.S. based creator Ingrid Nilsen started to post daily vlogs leading up to Christmas in 2011 which then became a tradition on YouTube (Merrilees, 2020). Referring to this tradition, independent Turkish creator Elif mentioned that she created daily vlogs, but she could not achieve the expected result:

> There is a very popular [tradition] abroad called Vlogmas – uploading a video every day throughout December. It was deathly hard to have this done. ... Also, I thought it would increase video views when I upload daily, but I actually got the opposite influence because people do not have 10 minutes to spare for my videos every day. Then, I became demoralised as I am filming a video every day, but the videos are not watched.

Elif's case here is important in the sense that every global trend might not work well in different local contexts. One reason her Vlogmas videos did not got more views might be related to the cultural specificity of her audience though she did not acknowledge this. This is because waiting for Christmas belongs more to a Christian cultural tradition. Contrary to her case, independent Irish creator Casey has also followed the tradition of Vlogmas since 2015, and it is observable from her YouTube channel that this practice works for her as her Vlogmas videos got a similar number of video views as her other vlogs.

In addition to the emergence of trends from content produced by key creators who have a large audience base and consequently are favoured by the algorithm, traditional media such as TV shows have an impact on SME trends as well. One localised example from the experiences of Turkish creators can be used to explore this further. Due to the coronavirus restrictions between March-June 2020, TV series in Turkey suspended

filming new episodes. However, *Survivor*, a Turkish version of a popular reality TV show, continued to air new episodes during this time because it was filmed in the Dominican Republic where the contestants were already in isolation. Thus, *Survivor* was a topic widely addressed in both old and new media. Turkish participant Barış, the video head in PH-4, for instance, mentioned that:

> To catch the agenda. So, there is nothing else. Whatever you do, first you have to catch the agenda because YouTube has a recommendation algorithm. If there is Survivor on the agenda, when you make a video about Survivor, good or bad, [YouTube] makes people watch it.

His point foregrounds, on the one side, the possibility of corporate media affecting SME, on the other side, the importance of algorithmic curation which is more likely to recommend any content on such reality TV shows to the audiences of this show.

As there are various ways of accessing entertainment content and creators use multiple social media platforms to promote themselves and distribute their cultural outputs, how creators understand what is trending in SME is not limited to their on-platform exploration. This is also because the algorithmically determined trending tab on YouTube might be misleading for particular entertainment genres. Based on his localised experience, independent Turkish creator Mert explained how he understands what is trending:

> Actually, it is starting to be shared on all platforms. I mean not only on YouTube but also on Instagram, Twitter. … Something becomes trending in this way indeed, not by appearing in the trending tab because when you look at Turkey, 15 trends out of 25 in the trending tab are summary of [TV] series and what will happen in the next episode of the series. Apart from that, something trending very rarely appears in the trends section, but we understand that something is trending when people share and speak about it.

For the same reason Mert mentions, Turkish participant Alp, a content editor in PH-1, also says that he regularly checks the channel pages of top YouTubers who are the trendsetters in other countries so that he will not miss any trend.

Trend changes within a competitive platform ecosystem drive the dynamics of creators' work which requires constant creation of new content with a regular uploading schedule in order to keep audiences' attention on their channel. This is because "the competitive and hierarchical structure of YouTube favours popular content, where certain trends seem to predominate the majority of the content" (Simonsen, 2011, p. 89). What Turkish participant Barış, the video head in PH-4, said signifies the importance of making content on emerging trends:

> Now let me first say this, YouTube is a star-based platform right now, okay, you don't have to be very creative when producing content on YouTube if you're a YouTuber. Just take something that is in the trends of YouTube and make your own interpretation. … but, as I said, in places like us [his production house] where the content stands out not the person, the issue is to find the conflict that the audience is curious about, to find the catharsis. … This [requires] being up to date very well, interpreting very well and even trying to see the future. For example, in the [coronavirus] lockdown period, we were thinking about what the kids who are going to take the ÖSS [Student Selection Exam] are doing, what they feel. The exam was suddenly moved to an earlier time so that we flunked. … I wish we could guess it too. You have to be both predictive and able to understand the audience's trouble.

He even adds another dimension to following trends; that is, he underscores the importance of predictability in foreseeing potential emerging trends.

When asked how they come up with content ideas, most of the research participants mentioned strategically looking for trending topics as a way to attract audience attention in addition to content they really interested in. Independent Irish creator Barry explained his method with these words:

> So, you'd be purposely thinking of trends and stuff that's going to get you lots of views, like, kind of clickbait stuff, that's like very clickable. So, like half of it is … just coming up with random ideas and the other half is like purposely strategically going for like virality.

Similarly, independent Irish creator Oisin follows the same method for finding new content ideas:

> Sometimes they come to you, sometimes you just go researching for trending topics on YouTube and see what other people are doing. Sometimes you might watch a video and it just gives you an idea. Sometimes I read a book and it gives me an idea. So, they can come from a lot of different sources and that's why I like to compile lists because not all ideas are good or not all ideas are executable, but if you accumulate enough ideas, you'll have enough that you can make.

Additionally, independent Irish creator Aoife mentioned a similar tactic:

> You can use Google Trends … [to] figure out … what people search at what time of year. … There's skill, but there is a science behind YouTube you have to make. … I have a Google Doc with video ideas and there is a little section in my stuff. That's like videos that people search for. So, it might not necessarily be something I'm really, really passionate about.

What is interesting in the case of Aoife is that she actually described her practices of YouTubing as "marrying two things" she is really passionate about – mental health and video, as mentioned in Chapter 4. Despite this, she considers making content in trending topics to gain more views.

Some creators, however, might be selective in making videos on trends. This is either because of creators' personal interests in creating their content or genre of their channel. The former is epitomised in independent Turkish creator Elif's account:

> For example, *Survivor* is at the forefront now. Here you can shoot a video about *Survivor*, but I don't watch it myself, so I don't want to shoot it just for [the video] to be watched because I'm not that. … Dalgona coffee has come into vogue and for example, I was shooting coffee content in my channel sometimes. … So, if there are some things that can be adapted from popular things to my channel, I definitely try to make them.

While Elif tries to follow trends, she adopts a selective approach to keep her channel's overall theme consistent in terms of reflecting her personal interests. Turkish participant Ilgın's point exemplifies another reason related to the importance of genre in producing content on trends. The PH-3's channel for which Ilgın works produces

content on cinema and television such as commentary on movies in theatres or online streaming platforms, interviews with celebrities, news about film festivals and so on. Therefore, as she explained, they are selective in producing video on trending content though they are still in need of following trends:

> There are not classic YouTube formats that we can adapt. … For example, the age range of our audience in the demographic graphic is 24-35; therefore, some content is not suitable for our audience at all, but we are watching channels thinking that how we can adapt it.

Following both accounts, it is discernible that SME trends show an alteration depending on genres.

After explaining the formation and ever-changing nature of SME trends as a result of complex interaction among various agents including creators, audiences, the platform algorithm and traditional media, I would like to draw attention to how this dynamic of work becomes part of precarity and results in both financial and emotional consequences for creators. To begin with, it is difficult to adapt video production to SME trends that are in a state of constant flux as producing YouTube videos requires significant time and energy. The costs of this may also differ depending on whether the content is produced by an individual creator, or a team of creators like in the PHs as well as the type of content being produced. For instance, independent Irish creator Luke who is an individual creator explained how his process does not quite fit to this dynamic:

> I wish I could follow the trends. My process is quite slow. So, by the time that I have the video, the trend is over, because trends are so fast in YouTube. … Any trend that I actually have been able to jump on in time has done really well for me. So, I wish I could do more of that. The only problem is my videos … usually require some sort of going out of your house and doing a big adventure type of thing. So, they're not easy to film, and they take a lot of time.

Due to the type of content he would like to create, he finds himself in a disadvantaged position. He, therefore, thinks that the YouTube algorithm is not fair as it favours popular content instead of giving weight to the quality of content.

In terms of psychological consequences, Turkish participant Can, the manager of PH-1, confirmed the impact of rapid changes by saying that:

> Every week all over again. We filmed yesterday. All over again. I mean it is old when you filmed it. That video is completely over. … It became old before it even got on the shelf [uploaded to YouTube]. We need to find a new content. … Therefore, this makes me very tired psychologically.

Turkish creator Uğur, the owner of PH-2, also mentioned an illustrative example to explain such rapid changes:

> You have to share something new every week. There is an example that we love so much. If I learn to fly this week and shoot a video in which I really fly, whole Turkey and even the world would talk about it, but they do not watch again a video in which I fly in the second week. So, you have to constantly share something new, and this really exhausts us.

While this constant need to be up to date and to find new content ideas contributes to the precarious nature of platformed content creation, this also creates emotional baggage for creators. Despite this, independent Turkish creator Mert normalised these rapid changes by indicating that:

> It has to change because everyone is quickly doing something that is trending that it is consumed away. So, it ends and now people hate to see it. … [This] is also compatible with the dynamics of the internet.

Turkish participant Barış, the video head in PH-4, furthermore, referred to the bright side of this dynamic:

> On the one hand, it is very tiring because the video you filmed today might be regarded as old next month, on the other hand, this means you have always a chance. I mean you cannot establish a kingdom on YouTube. You know, a man can be watched a lot, but he cannot stay in the trends, so you always have a chance because [YouTube] is always open to new. It will always give you a chance because it gets bored quickly.

Thus, changes in trends contribute to YouTube creators' experiences of precarity as this requires constantly chasing trend topics and video formats in order to attain (and sustain) algorithmic visibility. This same dynamic nonetheless might function as a motivator for creators in coping with uncertainties.

Trend Changes in a Competitive Platform Landscape

SME trends refer to not only trending video contents or genres, but also trending or emerging new digital platforms which provide different socio-technical affordances for entertainment. The ecology of SME is, on the one hand, precarious for platforms as they might face with "creator migration" (Cunningham and Craig, 2019). Craig (2019, p. 367), for instance, mentions the fall of Vine due to, but not limited to, its failure in creator management and introducing profitable means for monetisation. From a creator-centric approach, though, the rise and fall of platforms adds another dimension to the precariousness of creators' work. As a result, creators try to be responsive to SME trends and to develop platform mobility. In other words, a bit of foresight is required not only for guessing emerging content trends but also for guessing the next trending platform.

The statement by Irish participant Roisin, the production manager in PH-5, is worth noting:

> I would say disadvantage is you never know how it's going to end … I just mean trend wise, like YouTube is around now but like, could be gone … there's just so many new technologies. … you have to be up to date on every bit of software, every trend … you need to be online all the time. You need to see every viral video, every trend, every new software, every new digital trend, and you need to be on it straight away and if you're not, [you] fall behind and that's probably the disadvantage.

She mentioned this to point out the disadvantage of engaging in platformed content creation, and her account underscores the necessity of following the entire SME industry.

Within this competitive and ever-changing mediascape, independent Turkish creator Elif also talked about platform mobility while mentioning why she also makes content on TikTok:

> As I always say, it is necessary to switch to the right platform at the right time because in the past, for example, there was Vine and there were a lot of people who became influencers on Vine. Then, Vine is closed, and they became a history. None of them are recognised anymore, but which ones are recognised? Those who switched to YouTube at the right time … I think it is necessary to constantly follow the trends in order not to disappear.

By bringing attention to media change, independent Turkish creator Mert also indicated the necessity of platform mobility:

> The internet changes so quickly that there was Vine … for example 3 years ago, and people became famous through Vine; they produced awesome content; they earned awesome money and they did it as a work and now there is no Vine. There are many examples like this. Social platforms are changing very quickly. There was no TikTok, for example. Now, there is TikTok. Tomorrow, there may not be YouTube or … when I look at the examples of big channels, Turkey's first channels … are not being watched right now. The internet and audiences are changing very rapidly. The more you can catch this, the longer your life be on social media.

The accounts of both creators constitute evidence regarding how media change might result in precarity in case they fail to ensure migration to emerging entertainment platforms. Consequently, as Cunningham and Craig (2019, p. 94) state, "the multichannel and multiplatform practices of creator labour contribute to complex and exhausting labour conditions but also inform risk-management strategies to avoid platform precarity". Following TikTok to understand audience taste, making content on TikTok and adapting TikTok content such as trying TikTok lifehacks on their YouTube videos are some of those strategies that are traceable in the practices of the research participants.

Precarity for/through MCNs: Cultural Intermediation and Disintermediation

MCNs as cultural intermediaries have been integrated into this competitive video production landscape, and they have taken an active role in the formalisation and professionalisation of the SME industry as introduced in Chapter 2. The last section of this chapter is, therefore, reserved for discussion of how MCNs are faced with precarity, on the one hand, and generate precarious labour conditions for creators on the other. Precarity for and through MCNs can be summarised in three points: Firstly, MCNs need to adapt themselves to accelerated media change within the new screen ecology (Cunningham and Craig, 2019, p. 117). Secondly, creators speak out against MCNs because they only partner the income of the creators and provide little benefit to them (Lange, 2019, p. 235). Lastly, some creators mimic the business model of MCNs to circumvent precarity.

This research does not have enough data to elaborate how all MCNs are faced with precarity in SME. Nevertheless, there is one case that needs to be mentioned as it demonstrates the significance of local contexts for the operation of MCNs. The PH-1 I visited in Istanbul started its operation as an MCN in 2014; however, PH-1 started to produce content for its own channels after a while for three main reasons. Firstly, after a couple of months of starting its business, YouTube was blocked in Turkey. Between 27 March and 29 May 2014, the site was blocked because of a video which was regarded as revealing state secrets and posing a threat to the national security of the country (Bozdag, 2016, p. 134). In addition to this ban which directly interrupted intermediation between YouTube and creators, Can, the manager of PH-1, explained two other reasons contributing to precarity for MCNs in Turkey at that time:

> I do not know how beneficial an MCN is. As a manager of a basic MCN, I did not see the benefit of an MCN … because what you call an MCN must actually have a few things. One of them is that we said we sell advertising. We also said that we will do cross-promotion … For one thing, we had no contacts who give an advertisement. … In 2014, there was no brand to advertise on YouTube anyway. I mean there were not too much. … It started properly after 2015-2016. … Apart from that, there were not too many YouTubers to cross-promote.

This passage from Can foregrounds how the MCN experience is also localised to conditions in which creators work. As YouTube launched its partnership enabling channel monetisation in 2013 in Turkey, the scarcity of brands that would advertise on YouTube targeting Turkish users made Can's business hard to run. The low number of Turkish creators at that time, furthermore, posed another disadvantage as cross-promotion would not be beneficial as it should be. Consequently, the lack of these two essentials to run an MCN in Can's experience highlights the importance of local as well as temporal dynamics in a network's success. These aspects contribute to Cunningham, Craig and Silver's (2016) point describing this new screen ecology as precarious for MCNs.

Another example of precarity for MCNs is what Cunningham, Craig and Silver (2016, p. 385) call "talent flight". To clarify, talent or creator flight refers to a case in which MCNs lose their creators as they make new deals with traditional media companies or other MCNs after developing a marketable reputation. This situation, however, is not unique to MCNs. Creator flight may also create precarity for other agents in SME such as PHs which produce their own content via a team of creators. For example, after leaving the MCN model, PH-1 started to produce content for its own channels. Can, the manager of PH-1, mentioned that some of his co-creators employed by the PH-1 quit their job once they gained enough reputation to run their own channels. In describing one of his possible career paths as setting up an agency, Can made this statement:

> You can work with a model like set up an agency, find 3-4 different YouTubers who are young, sign brutal contracts with them, … grow them, … monetise them. … Then you will tangle with them in the future. They will want to grow up. They will leave you or something. I do not want to experience this loop again. … You can do this with better contracts but those who want to leave would still leave and everyone will want to leave at the end of the day.

While talking about the major drawback of this work model, Can also confirmed the possibility of talent flight for PHs.

From a creator-focused perspective, MCNs contribute to the precarisation of creators' work. In the existing literature on YouTube, much has been written about how MCNs

create precarity for creators. While creators join MCNs to mitigate the general insecurity of platformed content creation, to accelerate their process of professionalisation by receiving help in the areas such as video production, brand and digital rights management, and cross promotion as well as to increase their monetary gain by securing more brand deals, MCNs mostly fail to provide these promised services to creators who are in their network (Cunningham and Craig, 2019; Gardner and Lehnert, 2016; Lange, 2019; Walczer, 2021). In other words, creators mostly end up giving a part of their revenue to MCNs while receiving little or no benefit in return. Due to both industrial precarity and creator mismanagement, most MCNs have, therefore, disappeared from the field of SME in some contexts (Craig, 2019, p. 367). As opposed to their Western counterparts, MCNs in China have accomplished securing employment contracts with their creators, especially live streamers. Even though they proved to play a vital intermediary role in their career development, they also created the conditions for their exploitation (Craig, Lin and Cunningham, 2021, pp. 126-127). Also, in the case of the Indian mediascape, MCNs have successfully transformed and positioned themselves as active agents in content production and distribution in SME (Mehta, 2021).

However, in line with most creators' experiences with MCNs, some of the research participants in this study such as Conor, Barry and Casey who were affiliated with MCNs mentioned their dissatisfaction with the intermediation of their networks. Joining an MCN might be a way of mimicking the success of famous YouTubers. Independent YouTube creator Conor who lives in Ireland, for example, described why he joined an MCN:

> When I used to monetise my channel, I was a member of MCN … but basically, they take a cut from your revenue. So, … you get 70%, they take 30% but it didn't really apply to me because I never got the money. … The biggest selling point that MCN had before was that they would give you support if your channel has issues and also they would provide music and then also … promotional stuff. … I didn't really get anything out of it. So, I decided to leave that. … A lot of the big YouTubers that I used to watch was a member of this, maybe it was just me trying to fit in and I wanted to be like them, so I joined it.

His experience is important for demonstrating how he considered cultural intermediation by MCNs as a way to achieve success and thereby professional status, but he could not achieve this in practice. In a similar vein, joining an MCN is also related to "seeing the glitz and glamour" as independent Irish creator Barry mentioned:

> When I was like 16, because I thought like 'Oh, it looks so fancy, it was so cool' and I signed up for a two year [contract] … but I never got anything from that. … They said that they would help with monetisation but then YouTube got rid of monetisation anyway for like channels under 1,000 subscribers.

As they did not generate AdSense income from YouTube, these creators did not give a portion of their income to MCNs. Therefore, their experience with MCNs is not about financial precarity, but rather about not getting any benefits in return.

Furthermore, independent Irish creator Casey also mentioned her disappointing experience with three different MCNs:

> I never had a good experience, and I don't anticipate ever being part of one again. I've been with three different multi-channel networks. I found that every single one of them promise you the world when you're signing with them and then deliver it next to nothing. And they just take a portion of your AdSense earnings for the privilege of doing nothing for you. … I think that MCNs will do some things for you when you're a certain size, but when you're not like big enough, they don't care about you because their business plan is built on having as many creators as possible and they're taking a small commission of every single one of them, so they're only going to really bother with the really, really big creators and which always sort of rubbed me the wrong way because you sort of joined an MCN especially as a small YouTuber thinking they're going to help you grow but they don't help you grow. They just sort of ignore you until such time as you grow yourself. So yeah, I'm not part of an MCN, I'm happy to not be part of it and happy to not give up 10% of my earnings for no reason.

What is notable in her account is her emphasis on how MCNs prioritise already popular creators. The research participants who imagined growing their channels by

affiliating with MCNs, therefore, preferred disintermediation which means eliminating the role of MCNs in creators' production practices.

Despite not having first-hand experiences with MCNs, some creators interviewed for this project, on the other hand, preferred disintermediation from the very start because they either saw no benefit of MCNs or decide so based on other creators' experiences. To exemplify the former, Turkish participant Yiğit, the director in PH-1 and the production manager in PH-2, stated the reason for not partnering with an MCN in this way: "[B]ecause we are watched enough and there is no point in giving some of the … [AdSense] revenue elsewhere". In addition to considering partnership with MCNs unnecessary, creators also build knowledge of cultural intermediation of MCNs by sharing their experiences with each other. This practice which is similar to the case of algorithmic gossip results in strategies for managing precarity. More clearly, not signing up to an MCN in the first place emerges as a strategy for creators who do not want to share their income with these companies. Independent Turkish creator Mert talked about why he did not join an MCN:

> I have never wanted to sign up with an agency, MCN since I first started because … the experience of my friends using an agency or an MCN has always been very negative, and this created a bias in me. … at the end of the day, it turns to this. I mean I am telling the experiences I heard. It only turns to partnering your YouTube income, not finding any [brand] partnerships, not supporting the channel in any way, not doing what they promise. I have always heard these [stories]. It did not happen to me. So, I was a little bit biased and still I am.

The failure of MCNs in delivering their promises to creators has become an issue which is widely circulated among creator communities. Similarly, independent Irish creator Luke mentioned:

> I've been approached by a couple and just ignored it just because I asked other people … and to be honest everyone just said they are not any good … they just said they would take whatever percentage of your money and what you would get from that is basically nothing. So, … they're actually giving you very little value, then what's the point of being with them?

Independent Turkish creator Elif, furthermore, provided a different reason for not signing up to any MCN or creator agency:

> [A] friend of mine has been defrauded; the man has not paid for months, and the same agency has done the same thing to everyone and so on. It has pocketed their money and how can I pay my rent if there is such a thing to me now? Frankly, I don't want to experience a situation like that. So, I don't want to go into such things.

Building knowledge of MCNs through the experiences of other creators, they strategically prefer disintermediation and aim to individually grow their channels.

Finally, some creators mimic the business model of MCNs themselves to circumvent precarity. This risk management strategy was observable in one of the PHs researched for this project. The PH-2, for instance, is not institutionalised as an MCN but acts as one. Turkish creator Uğur, the owner of the PH-2, supports his girlfriend, Deniz, and three of his friends by following a similar model to MCNs such as helping his friends to grow their channels via cross-promotion and providing assistance with filming and editing videos in exchange for 50% of their income once they reach a certain level. Turkish creator Deniz who is affiliated with PH-2 accounted for this work model by saying that:

> [The income of the channel] belonged to me until I had a certain good income but of course, after all, I [use] editing etc. those kinds of things here and do not pay them a salary. I'll give a certain part of my income to Uğur.

Their partnership, however, is based only on verbal declaration without a written contract between them.

Uğur, in that case, commercialises his social relationships; that is, he aims to translate his social capital into economic one. Yiğit, the production manager in PH-2, explained why they needed this work model:

> Our income started to fall short. A single YouTube channel is okay, but the income does not compensate the expenses properly. A bit more income was needed. Therefore, we have actually set up another YouTube channel.

As a consequence, they started to generate new sources of revenue to bear the expenses of running a PH as well as increased their overall income. When I asked Uğur whether he has any intention to operate as an MCN, he stated that:

> We are planning to work in such a way as well. … [W]hen an influencer comes and says to me that 'Uğur, I want to join your team,' we are now in a position to provide service to him/her. We have such plans in this year.

On the one hand, they do this to cope with financial precarity resulting from platformised experiences. On the other hand, they might experience other types of precarity such as talent flight experienced by MCNs and PHs in the future.

To sum up, confirming previous studies, the research participants who joined MCNs stated their dissatisfaction with the operation of MCNs based on their own experiences and therefore their preference for disintermediation. Some research participants, on the other hand, collaborate with other members in YouTube's creator community to build up their own knowledge of how MCNs operate, and this enables their disintermediation. The failure of MCNs in providing assistance to creators that leads to creator flight coupled with MCNs' precarious position in the competitive SME ecology has paved the way for the disappearance of cultural intermediation by MCNs. Some creators, however, put the MCN model into practice in their own ways as part of their risk-management strategies to minimise the effects of platformised precarity.

Conclusion

This chapter elaborated several uncertainties in the productive labour practices of Irish and Turkish YouTube creators and how the precarious nature of YouTubing shapes their labour practices and experience of work. Precarity in the case of YouTube creators might be similar to other sectors, primarily the CCIs, since they have concerns about the future of their careers and continuation of their success as well as experience income and job insecurity. However, the precarious nature of YouTubing is very much dependent on the dynamics of platformisation including opaque platform governance, the algorithmic culture, rapid changes in SME trends, and a high degree of competition among YouTube creators. Narratives of their precarity are future oriented by considering the possibility of algorithmic invisibility, losing the competition in the video marketplace and loss of audience attention due to outdatedness. Their work,

therefore, necessitates constantly being up to date by following trends and other YouTube creators, creating new content ideas in the present in order to minimise uncertainties in the future, and develop risk management strategies such as developing platform mobility and not signing up with MCNs. Nevertheless, this does not homogenise the factors paving the way for the precarisation of their labour practices because precarisation of the work of YouTube creators is highly localised.

Even though this chapter contextualised YouTubing in the platform's regulations and algorithmic culture and more broadly in the field of SME, there are aspects specific to the geographic context of the participants in this discussion. For example, the location of audiences emerges as a significant aspect determining AdSense revenue coming from the platform. In relation to this, language becomes a notable factor for Turkish creators to develop an international audience whereas some Irish creators imagine the platform's algorithm as a to barrier to achieving a global reach. Another aspect of localisation is related to the emergence of SME trends which affect creators' content decisions in order to increase visibility. While these points presented in this chapter demonstrate the impact of localisation on YouTuber labour, there is still a need to further explore how the national contexts of media production shape creators' labour practices. Hence, the next chapter addresses the impact of localisation on creators' experience of precarity by contextualising their practices in wider geopolitical contexts.

Chapter 6

Localisation of Precarity in Social Media Entertainment

Introduction

This chapter looks at how the wider geographical contexts of Ireland and Turkey shape the labour practices of YouTube creators and make them precarious in more localised ways. Initially, it explains what localisation means in the case of platformed content creations and how the localisation of precarity is examined in the context of this research. Then, the chapter presents the localised experiences of Irish and Turkish creators in two separate sections. This is not because it aims to compare the two cases but because each case highlights different aspects regarding localised precarity. First, it describes how Irish creators see themselves as made precarious by mostly situating their practices of YouTubing in a small country in terms of population size. Second, it moves to the case of Turkish creators whose precarity experiences are localised depending on the economic, political, and cultural contexts of Turkey: It establishes the relationship between advertising spending and the state of a country's economy as grounding for the analysis of how precarity in the case of Turkish YouTube creators is localised through lower ad rates on YouTube. Then, it explains internet regulations in the political context of Turkey which operate as not only tools for governing digital media production but also sources of precarity for YouTube creators. Lastly, the chapter elucidates how cultural contexts of media production informally govern the production practices of Turkish YouTube creators; that is, how adherence to social and cultural conventions results in self-censorship practices to secure audience loyalty and thereby to increase value. Overall, the chapter demonstrates the significance of geographic specificities which range from the population size to the availability of recourses and from internet governance regimes to sociocultural values in understanding the precarious work of YouTube creators.

Localisation of Precarity

Platformisation dynamics and their relation to precarity described in the previous chapter do not solely pertain to the practices of Turkish and Irish creators since those engaging in video production in different parts of the world might experience similar

uncertainties. However, this does not necessarily mean the homogenisation of precarious working conditions for content creation. This is partly because there is not one global YouTube. In 2007, the platform launched its localised versions which customise content, search results, video rankings and comments based on users' geographic location (Burgess and Green, 2018, p. 131). Local versions of YouTube provided creators with a chance to become partners, monetise their channels and access YouTube generated resources to grow their channels in their own languages (YouTube, 2015). This also increased digital ads in local languages targeting local audiences (Punathambekar and Mohan, 2019, p. 214). Consequently, "around the world local YouTube 'scenes' have emerged, both organically and with YouTube's influence and with the participation of talent-hungry MCNs" (Burgess and Green, 2018, p. 133). Considering different YouTube production cultures across the globe, it should be noted that platform localisation not only refers to the production of location-based data, availability of local language preferences and locally relevant content, and the placing of local ads but also the localised ways in which creators use the platform and make content for the platform. This term thus necessitates more than just on-site exploration of localisation. Localisation of digital platforms should be examined by touching on the significance of the political, economic, and socio-cultural specificity of particular regions to the production and reception of SME content (Mohan and Punathambekar, 2019; Punathambekar and Mohan, 2019; Mehta, 2020).

While the significance of examining local experiences of media workers taking part in transnational film and television production has already been shown in the production studies literature (Banks, Conor and Mayer, 2016; Mayer, Banks and Caldwell, 2009b), the same attempt is essential to understand diverse local experiences of YouTube creators. Curtin and Sanson (2016, p. 13), for example, highlight the significance of "the ways particular cultural and political histories and economic policies shape working conditions, cultural values, and personal/professional networks in local production cultures" in the context of globally dispersed modes of film and television productions requiring global media companies to work with local media workers. Within the scope of this research, this type of inquiry necessitates a closer look at the localised experiences of content creators within the digital media ecosystem. Localisation in this study refers to the way in which content creator labour is situated in the political, economic, and cultural contexts of a particular nation-state.

As is evident in the experience of Irish and, in particular, Turkish YouTube creators, precarity is also fostered by the localised experiences of creators. Hence, the coinage the localisation of precarity aims to draw attention to the complexity of the relationships between platforms, content creator labour and local contexts, which have an effect on the stability of creator's already unstable work.

The Case of Irish YouTube Creators

It is notable that some of the economic precarity that comes from geography are experienced by Irish creators interviewed for this project, although they do not see themselves as made precarious in the same way as Turkish creators do. For most Irish creators, YouTubing remains either a labour of love or emerges as a passion that they try to turn into a full-time career as described in Chapter 4. That is, most of them do not have a big enough audience to generate income from YouTube AdSense, to secure external brand deals or to worry about audience flight due to cultural or political sensitivities. For Irish creators, however, the challenge is still to grow their audience. Therefore, the main theme in relation to the localisation of precarity in the case of Irish YouTube creators is related to the country's population size.

Ireland is a small country considering its population and geographic scale. According to the latest press statement of Central Statistics Office (2021), "Ireland's population was estimated to be 5.01 million in April 2021". Independent YouTube creator Barry, for example, mentioned how this geographic specificity may pose a limit to the growth of his channel:

> I feel like it is restricted in a certain way. … There's not a lot of people in Ireland for one. There's only 5 million people and like, how much of them have YouTube and how much of them are going to find my channel.

Furthermore, the production manager of PH-5, Roisin described the general situation in the media industry in Ireland, but she also tied her point to the population size:

> I think we're definitely limited in Ireland. That kind of crosses over into a lot of industries I suppose. … There're so many talented people in this country, but there's just not as much opportunity as there is in other countries. … We have so many well-educated Irish people, especially in the media industry, like

> film and TV. Yet, we outsource for everything. … Why aren't we producing those high-quality projects ourselves with the skilled people that we have here. … And that probably could overlap into YouTube as well. … There is so many Irish YouTube stars all over the world. Why have they got higher followership than if they were in Ireland because there're more people in other places and more people means variety and more variety means you're more likely to get more people that are interested in the stuff that you're interested in.

In a similar vein, independent creator Luke also sees the small population size as a factor that may restrict making a media career from YouTubing:

> The other side of being an Irish YouTuber that I don't like is obviously this limitation on the amount of people that are here. If you're only creating content for those people, then you're not really going to be able to make a career out of it or the career that I envision out of it.

When I asked about the effect of the English language used in his videos for appealing a global audience, Luke said:

> That's the hope in some ways. I try to make, you know, English-speaking videos that should appeal to a wide range of English-speaking countries. But I find that the problem with being the Irish YouTuber is that if you don't get your Irish audience to really like your videos, then your videos don't seem to go anywhere and so no one sees them. So that's the problem.

His statement above reiterates the point about the mystery of the algorithm described in Chapter 5. To clarify, he believes that achieving algorithmic visibility in other local versions of YouTube requires first gaining popularity in the Irish YouTube. Irish creators' thoughts about the geographic specificity such as the population size and their experiences with the algorithm, therefore, urge us to question how global YouTube is. Given that the platform uses various metrics to determine popularity of videos and thereby quantify the success of creators, developing an international audience is quite challenging.

Despite this, in the case of Irish creators, there is always a possibility of establishing a link to the hegemonic version of YouTube through language and culture. Independent

creator Casey's answer to my question about being a YouTuber in Ireland is a good way of demonstrating this point:

> I think that it's good because there's not a huge amount of people doing it. So, you are kind of an outlier. … The American market, for example, is really really saturated and it's really really hard to start and get going and get noticed. … Not only is there not that many people doing it, so you don't have a huge amount of competition, but also there is a market of Americans who want to watch content from Irish people. So, that's positive.

Since she managed to develop an American audience via producing content that represents the Irish culture, the relatively small Irish YouTuber community compared to the US, or the UK seems to be an advantage to her. However, considering the challenges of developing an international or more specifically an American audience, she is indeed an outlier among the research participants as well.

Independent Irish creator Oisin also pointed out another advantage of having only a small community of creators in Ireland:

> You'd probably have a bigger audience if you're in another country. The benefit is that you can have relatively few subscribers here … and people sort of know you, which is a good thing. So, you like a big fish in a small pond. … I think a lot of people knowing you in Ireland is a good thing, because it's such a small place. You can get a lot of business that way. You know, so there's a way for YouTube just sort of help your business that makes your actual money.

Although the population size has certainly an effect on his audience development, he may benefit from this in other ways such as securing business deals for his freelance job.

Another point related to the geographic specificity is about the peripheral status of Ireland concerning YouTube production. While talking about negative aspects of engaging in YouTubing in Ireland, some participants mentioned the lack of YouTube spaces or rareness of events such as YouTube conventions. For instance, this is how independent Irish creator Aoife imagines being a YouTuber in another country:

> I think a big part of it is having other creative people. … If I lived in another country, I would have known more people who are interested in it and kind of feel more free to be more creative … and I also think … there are very little kind of YouTube conventions and stuff in this country.

In this sense, she feels that YouTubing in Ireland is not advantageous as there is both a small community of YouTubers and a lack of events where creators meet and potentially collaborate with each other. Additionally, independent creator Conor interviewed for this project mentioned the lack of YouTube Spaces:

> If you go to the UK or the US, … you have the studios ... You can access this if you're a partner on YouTube. … because you see these big YouTubers that they'd go to YouTube studios and use the space to film.

In a way, he implies that becoming a YouTube star also requires support from the platform as in the case of YouTube Spaces where creators have access to more professional equipment to film their videos and meet other creators.

Beyond the issues that emerge about working in the "Irish YouTube", there is no other strong evidence in the data that the political, economic, or cultural contexts of Ireland affect the way they experience precarity. There is an assumed liberal cultural politics of the Irish state as they did not mention any specific ways that the country's internet governance regimes or general political climate of the country make them precarious. For example, in terms of the political context, independent Irish creator Oisin mentioned that:

> Like, obviously Ireland would give me certain biases potentially towards my humour and stuff, but … I don't think it actually changes the content that I make. If I was in, say some suppressive governments in whatever country, that would probably affect what I could say. But in terms of freedom of speech, I don't feel like I have any restrictions in Ireland.

Nevertheless, another participant Aoife, for example, refrains from sharing her political opinion online:

> I would be very careful to not raise political opinions online, not because … I'm not confident in my opinions or what I believe in. … Regardless of where

> I stand, I wouldn't engage with that online just because, you know, I think people will attack you regardless of your opinion.

The reason behind this, however, is her personal choice and is more related to the online culture than the Irish context. Though her account does not state as such, her online experience cannot be easily separated from the Irish context. It should be noted that there is a culture of online harassment in Ireland, particularly indicated by many female journalists (McCully, 2019). Thus, more research is needed to understand how this online culture might shape the experiences of Irish creators.

Overall, Irish creators referred to the population size and, in relation to this, to the existence of relatively smaller YouTuber community in the country as well as Ireland's peripheral status regarding YouTube production. Their localised experiences clearly demonstrate that their labour practices are made less stable by the national context. In the accounts of Irish participants, it can be observed that precarity emerges from market pressures and visibility but not from the economic, governance, or socio-political context. At least it is not recognised as such.

The Case of Turkish YouTube Creators

How precarity comes from geographic specificities emerged more extensively in the narratives of Turkish participants. While describing the challenges stemming from YouTubing specifically in Turkey, creators referred to various geopolitical aspects of the country such as the unstable nature of the Turkish economy, restrictive internet regulations, as well as the political and cultural values of the society. I first closely look at the relationship between the Turkish economy and advertising spending to discuss the localisation of lower ad rates on YouTube. Second, I explain Turkey's regulatory framework that not only governs the internet but also produces precarious working conditions for YouTube creators. Lastly, I focus on how Turkish creators pay attention to sociocultural and political sensitivities of their audiences to maintain their audience base.

Developing and Unstable Turkish Economy

The localisation of precarity can be evidenced through the examination of advertising in localised contexts. The advertiser-supported revenue model of YouTube constitutes

a prominent aspect of platform localisation (Lotz, 2019, p. 343). As already flagged in the previous chapter, "CPM-based advertising sales vary greatly between countries" and even by the time of the year within the same country (Vonderau, 2016b, p. 368). The precarity of Turkish YouTube creators is localised through YouTube CPM rates. As YouTube gets its advertising from not only global but also local brands that appeal to Turkish users, its business model is, therefore, inherently tied to fluctuations in the Turkish economy that have an effect on advertising spending of the country (Doyle, 2002). Consequently, Turkish YouTube creators' income streams are made precarious by the developing and unstable Turkish economy.

Considering that advertiser-funded media is quite common and not exclusive to digital media, the relation between advertising and the state of economy has been widely researched, especially in developed economies. Focusing on advertising in general, Doyle (2002) and van der Wurff, Bakker and Picard (2008) provide a useful insight into the relation between the size of an advertising market and the country's economy. Though there are multiple variables affecting the level of advertising and advertising in different media react to economic change divergently, there is an increase in advertising expenditures when the economy grows (Doyle, 2002; van der Wurff, Bakker and Picard, 2008). In other words, it is evident that the richer the country is, the more advertising spending it has (Doyle, 2002, p. 48).

According to 2005 figures of the advertising market in Turkey, Barış (2007, p. 293) points out that more than half of the advertising spending belongs to the television industry, compared to the print media and radio; however, the market "is considered to be relatively small compared to the number of actors in the broadcasting scene and that makes it difficult for small entrepreneurs to enter the broadcasting market or to survive". When looking at the most recent figures of the Turkish Association of Advertising Agencies (Reklamcılar Derneği, RD) (2020, p. 9), in 2019 TV's share in the advertising market is 46% and that of digital media's is 33.3% with 19% increase compared to previous year. Although digital advertising investments have been increasing each year since they started, TV's share are still higher.

A closer look at Turkey's digital advertising investments reveals that it is less developed compared to other countries such as Ireland and the UK. In Turkey, €785m was spent on digital advertising in 2019 with a growth rate of 19.1% compared to the

previous year, while digital ad spend reached €669m in Ireland by growing 15.9% and to €21,486m in the UK by growing 15.3% (IAB Europe, 2020). However, what is more significant here is to look at digital ad spend per capita which is a metric reflecting "how much each online consumer is worth to advertisers" to indicate "the maturity level of national online advertising markets" (Grece, 2016, p. 11). Looking at the figures of 2019, digital ad spend per capita is €9.7 in Turkey, whereas it is €140.4 in Ireland and €324.7 in the UK (IAB Europe, 2020). Turkey thus emerges as an outlier as digital ad spend per capita is among the lowest in the European market, and this actually makes the YouTube CPM much lower in the country.

During the interview, Can, the manager of PH-1, explained how the YouTube CPM is localised:

> For Turkey, there are brands … which want to place ads on YouTube. There is an auction in Google AdSense. … Of course, this is an online auction. In this auction, bids are being created which shows how much money YouTube gets from them [advertisers] for 1,000 views. Of course, [ad prices] is determined by … how much competition [in the auction]. … Since there is less competition in Turkey, they [brands] do not pay that much money. Thus, Turkey's CPM rates are lower because there is less brand. Why are there less brands? This is because the guys still see this place as a second screen.

Elif, an independent YouTube creator, also mentioned how competition in the local ad market affects ad prices and thereby their income:

> Advertising revenues in other countries ... are higher, so they earn a lot more money from YouTube. ... That is why famous YouTubers in the U.S. live in mansions in Los Angeles; they have 3 or 5 cars because in the U.S. the number of advertisers is higher as digital [advertising] is far ahead of us. … The more brands try to display ads on videos, the more their revenue increases. When 3 people try to display, they keep it [ad price] lower.

The relative marginalisation of digital media in Turkey's advertising spend with lower ad prices in comparison to other European markets is one factor that localises the precariousness of Turkish YouTube creators. This also has a strong relation with the platformisation of financial precarity as it underscores the absence of a minimum rate

of return for the labour of creators. In order to compensate for lower CPMs in Turkey, creators need to get as many video views as possible.

In addition to the algorithmic invisibility which decreases AdSense revenue owing to the abundance of content on YouTube, lower CPMs in Turkey increases the necessity of engaging with non-scalable ways of generating income (i.e., external brand deals) even more. Mert, an independent YouTube creator, mentioned his disgruntlement regarding this necessity:

> I wish [the CPM] is higher in Turkey as well because at the moment, for example, influencers see money they earn from AdSense … as side income, as if deriving the main income from [brand] collaborations, but it should not be like that.

There is, however, a degree of ambivalence regarding external sponsorship deals, which creates income fluctuation. As Can mentioned during the interview, companies tend to offer more sponsorship deals towards the end of the year in order to finish their advertising budgets, while creators' revenues coming from such external deals are lower at the beginning of the year. This uncertainty not only leads to income fluctuation but also causes alteration in terms of their workload.

When asked what would be different if they were YouTube creators in another country, most of them highlighted the possibility of earning relatively higher income. For instance, Yiğit, who is a director in PH-1 and a production manager in PH-2, said that "If I were doing this job in a different country, I would probably have a better income". Uğur, a YouTube creator and owner of PH-2, also stated that "I earn a lot more money because ... YouTube revenue in the U.S. is 20 times more compared to Turkey". Furthermore, Deniz, a YouTube creator in PH-2, indicated that:

> For example, if I were in the US, I think you could film a lot more different things and because the income will be higher, and accordingly, money will increase my purchasing power, much more can be done. Economically, we would be comfortable.

In a sense, creators have similar ways of romanticising other countries in terms of a higher income opportunity.

Additionally, the amount of digital advertising by brands as well as external sponsorship deals are very much dependent on the Turkish economy because companies might reduce their advertisement budgets in case of an economic crisis. The 2001 Turkish economic crisis caused by the collapse of the banking system can be examined as an example. In the aftermath of the crisis, "advertising expenditures increased 4.6 per cent on a Turkish lira basis whereas it decreased 46.7 per cent on a U.S. dollar basis" because of the devaluation of the Turkish currency (Yanatma, 2016, p. 12). During this period, even some big media conglomerates in Turkey suffered from the effects of a severe decline in advertisement spending (Yesil, 2016, p. 89). Since 2002, the advertising spending has entered into a period of steady growth with the exception of 2009 which demonstrates the effects of the global financial crash of 2008-2009 (Reklamcılar Derneği, n.d.). Given that this crisis was experienced globally, and advertising expenditures are more likely to decrease during economic downturns, this situation is not unique to Turkey (van der Wurff, Bakker and Picard, 2008). During the dot com crash in 2001, the financial crisis in 2008-2009 as well as the Eurozone crisis in 2012, the ad spend in Ireland was also negatively affected (IAB Ireland, 2021). Nevertheless, the Irish economy has recovered from such crises and is steadily growing due to the stability of the Euro (Whelan, 2014). Therefore, there is less fluctuation in the economic context for Irish creators. Also, as Picard (2001, p. 12) pointed out, there are multiple factors affecting advertiser choices during economic recessions such as "the nature of the economies, the degree of economic fluctuation, segments of industry affected, [and] national economic policies". In that case, it is perhaps necessary to explain the unstable nature of the Turkish economy.

After the integration of the Turkish economy into the global financial system in 1980s, the economy was "trapped in a vicious circle of high real interest rates, an overvalued domestic currency, and increased volatility in the flows of speculative short-term foreign capital" (Boratav and Yeldan, 2006, p. 448). Following the 2001 Turkish economic crisis, the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) came to power in Turkey in the general elections of 2002. Since then, the country has been ruled by the same political party. The AKP's neoliberal economic policies that rely on "speculative foreign capital and non-fettered dynamics of the market forces" have maintained the unstable and crisis-prone economic structure (Yeldan and Ünüvar, 2015, p. 1). In addition to being adversely affected by global financial crises with its

open, financialised economy, the Turkish economy is also in the midst of ongoing currency crises. In 2018, for example, the country experienced an economic downturn because of a severe currency depreciation which "is related to a combination of state capitalism with certain neoliberal features in an increasingly de-institutionalized domestic political governance framework" (Öniş and Kutlay, 2020, p. 24). This has resulted in a decrease in consumer spending and therefore many companies have lowered their advertising expenditures (MarketLine, 2020, p. 8).

Within this economic context, the relation between ad spending and economic crisis has also been confirmed by at least one of the research participants; Uğur, the owner of PH-2, said:

> In a slightest [economic] crisis, there is no sponsor and brands do not advertise on YouTube either. … Since a smallest [political] event affects the economy in the same way, it directly affects us as well.

The precariousness of content creation is, thus, localised given the unstable nature of the Turkish economy. This is because it not only affects the YouTube CPM rates but also availability of external sponsorship deals.

Internet Regulations in the Political Context of Turkey

The political sphere in national contexts, as much as the economic field, affects the operation of digital platforms which have enabled global production and reception of media. This is because laws and policies regulating media at the national level are still eminently important in regard to the blocking or circulation of certain media (Flew and Suzor, 2019, p. 164). As Punathambekar and Mohan (2019, p. 212) mention, nation-states' intention to exercise control over digital platforms and the way in which platforms respond to local politics eventually shape digital cultures and so digital working cultures. In parallel with this, restrictive internet regulation policies of the current right-wing conservative government formed by the AKP contribute to Turkish YouTube creators' precarity through systems of direct control.

In Turkey, there were no specific laws aiming to regulate the internet until 2001 as it was thought that the existing legal framework (i.e., the Turkish Criminal Law and the Press Law) was adequate for regulating crimes committed online (Akdeniz and

Altıparmak, 2008, p. 3). In 2001, the first parliamentary bill which aimed to regulate internet publications in accordance with the rules governing traditional mass media was introduced by the government, but the president of the time – Ahmet Necdet Sezer – vetoed the Bill on the grounds that it jeopardised freedom of expression (Akdeniz and Altıparmak, 2008, pp. 4-5). Nevertheless, the following year, the Parliament approved the Bill which brought the internet under the Press Law and included provisions subjecting online content to severe restrictions and punishments similar to those applied to traditional media (Tunç, 2004, p. 96). It soon became clear that regulating the internet under the existing legal framework was not adequate as the internet is different from the traditional media regarding its actors (Kinikoglu, 2014, p. 37). More recently, the AKP took significant steps to regulate the internet by passing "the Internet Law" aka "Law No. 5651 entitled Regulation of Publications on the Internet and Suppression of Crimes Committed by means of Such Publication" on May 4, 2007; this law provided "the basis of a mass blocking of websites in Turkey" (Akdeniz, 2010, pp. 2-4). The law consisted of "some definitions and organisational structure, a catalogue of crimes, the legal framework for banning websites and a few procedures" (Akgül and Kırlıdoğ, 2015, p. 5). After this law, the Telecommunications Communication Presidency (Telekomünikasyon İletişim Başkanlığı, TİB), established under the Information and Communication Technologies Authority (Bilgi Teknolojileri ve İletişim Kurumu, BTK) in 2005, has been entitled to regulate the sector and to impose bans on websites but has acted more as a censoring body (Akgül and Kırlıdoğ, 2015, p. 6). The TİB was, however, closed with the Decree-Law issued under the state of emergency in 2016 and the duties under the authority of this institution were transferred at that point to the BTK (Akgül, 2016).

Traditional restrictions on media content regulation that rely on historical, political, constitutional, cultural, religious and moral values also constitute the basis of nation-states' frameworks for internet regulation (Akdeniz and Altıparmak, 2008, p. 1). As Yesil (2016, p. 3) argues in her book investigating "Turkey's political economic, social, and cultural terrains through the lens of the country's media system", the AKP's governing strategies for media, including new media, demonstrate not only change but also continuity with the 1980s "especially with regard to … policy making and regulatory frameworks, and the sway of a statist, nationalist ethos". Confirming her argument, the enactment of the Internet Law came after the circulation of defamatory

videos on YouTube including ones insulting Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey, coupled with the state's apprehension of the availability of harmful and inappropriate content like child pornography and incentives for drug use and suicide (Akdeniz, 2010, p. 4).

The AKP tightened their control by introducing social media bans, removing content, blocking DNS and VPN services and engaging in surveillance of users in the aftermath of "two major legitimacy crises" (Yesil, Sözeri and Khazraee, 2017, pp. 7-12): first, the Gezi Park protests which started with environmentalist aims in June 2013 and turned into an anti-government movement across the country, and then the December 2013 corruption scandal which was a criminal investigation into key government officials involved in fraud, money laundering and bribery. After a failed coup attempt in July 2016, "the AKP's internet policy was similarly shaped by political anxieties which ultimately expanded and fortified the existing online control regime" (Yesil, Sözeri and Khazraee, 2017, p. 12).

Additionally, in July 2020, the AKP government passed new legislation which obligates social media companies with over 1 million Turkish users to open an office in Turkey, appoint a legal Turkish-based representative and store Turkish users' data locally (*Bianet*, 2020). Platforms which do not want to comply with this new regulation will be subject to administrative fines, advertisement bans and slowing of platform bandwidth by up to 90%. The platforms, in retrospect, tended to comply with the requests of the Turkish government in order not to suffer the loss of their users and advertising revenues in Turkey's digital market (Yesil, 2016, p. 120). Along with other SMPs such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, YouTube made an official announcement demonstrating the platform's acceptence of local laws and indicating that the platform will appoint a local representative in compliance with the amended internet law.[4] In this announcement, YouTube (2020) emphasised its "commitments to freedom of expression, access to information, and transparency" and mentioned that this step will not change the way the platform reviews content removal requests as well as how it stores and uses user data. Despite the platform's assurance, these controls function not only to restrict the freedom of expression and of access to

[4] Since this new law has raised several concerns about freedom of expression of Turkish social media users, giving full freedom to SMPs has even become the election promise of the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP) (Kılıçdaroğlu, 2021).

information, but also to maintain precarity for Turkish YouTube creators who rely on income associated with their platform mediated media production practices.

In accordance with the Internet Law, by the end of 2019, a total of 408,494 domain names and websites were blocked in Turkey (Akdeniz and Güven, 2020, p. 2), details of which can be found in reports written by Akdeniz and Altıparmak (2008), Akdeniz (2010), and Akdeniz and Güven (2020). According to the latest Google Transparency Report, Turkey has made content removal requests totalling 12,843 since 2009, which places Turkey "among the top countries with the most removal requests (Yesil, 2016, p. 119). These numbers indicate that SMPs in Turkey face tighter regulations and must deal with specific content removal requests by the state or courts despite being US-based entities (Gillespie, 2017, p. 259).

In Turkey, the first YouTube ban was issued by the Istanbul 1st Criminal Court of Peace in March 2007, before the enactment of the internet censorship law, because of a video deemed illegal under the law on crimes against Atatürk (Akdeniz, 2010, p. 5). A total of 17 YouTube related blocking orders were issued by Turkish courts between March 2007 and June 2008 for various reasons including terrorist propaganda, defamation, obscenity, insulting Turkishness; the majority of these stem from crimes against Atatürk (Akdeniz and Altıparmak, 2008, p. 25). So far, the longest blocking of access to YouTube lasted more than 2 years starting from June 2008 to November 2010 (Akgül and Kırlıdoğ, 2015, p. 7). In March 2014, Turkey banned YouTube again for approximately 2 months to protect national security (Bozdag, 2016, p. 134). While the state's particular regulations indicate how Turkish YouTube creators' labour practices are strictly tied to current internet regulations in the country, this also demonstrates that YouTube operating as a global platform is dependent on such regulations as well. In other words, YouTube is not only governed by economic practices but also political practices that, in turn, depend on national and historical context.

Effects of Restrictive Internet Governance on YouTube Content Creation

Based on these past examples, the possibility of YouTube being banned is one of the most important concerns of Turkish YouTube creators about the future of their work.

Alp, a content editor in PH-1, ties his concerns about the future of his work to the Turkish political context in this way:

> I have several concerns. Namely the political conjuncture in the country that we live in. … We are in an authoritarian government, and they can shut down the internet whenever they want or close YouTube.

As the possibility of YouTube being banned remains in Turkey, Turkish YouTube creators continue to experience employment related insecurity. As happened in the past, users might access the platform through VPN services that sustained the platform's popularity among the Turkish population. This situation would nevertheless still foster financial precarity and job insecurity for creators. This is not only because of a potential decrease in number of views as a major part of their audience is from Turkey but also a possible reduction in Google Ads and external sponsorship deals from local brands.

Another aspect related to the localisation of precarity shaped by Turkey's political context is its impact on the labour process. There is the possibility of monitoring and regulating of YouTube broadcasting by the Radio and Television Supreme Council (Radyo ve Televizyon Üst Kurulu, RTÜK). Founded after the Broadcasting Law came into effect in 1994, RTÜK has always been a politicised organisation which "functions more like a penalizing and censoring body as opposed to a regulatory one" (Yesil, 2016, pp. 47-48). In August 2019, the Turkish government has authorised RTÜK to grant a broadcasting license to online streaming services like Netflix and its local counterparts such as BluTV and puhutv and monitor their content. It is also authorised removal of any content that it deems inappropriate (Aydin and Ozer, 2019). Following that, in August 2020, Netflix had to cancel its Turkish series *If Only* as the platform could not get permission from RTÜK to start filming because of a gay character and the producers were unwilling to alter the screenplay (Sanderson, 2020). Although this regulation does not currently cover YouTube, the scope of such regulation might in the future be extended to include YouTube as well. Accordingly, the Turkish YouTube creators interviewed bore this in mind and tried to produce not only advertiser-friendly content but also culturally and politically acceptable content in order to avoid potential demonetisation, future tax obligations or administrative fines that might stem from RTÜK regulations.

While producing non-violent video content is an example of advertiser-friendly content which is more likely to be promoted by the algorithm, making alcohol-free video content exemplifies a culturally and politically acceptable decision that is appropriate for potential RTÜK regulations. As Lotz (2019, p. 339) states, "media with any reliance on advertising tend to be governed by the strategies of advertiser-supported media that prioritize content likely to draw large audiences". Accordingly, YouTube's (n.d.-b) advertiser-friendly content guidelines cover various topics including the use of inappropriate language, violence, adult content, hateful content, tobacco, and drug-related content and so on. While explaining the effect of such content policies on his practices, Uğur, the owner of PH-2, gives violent content as an example and mentions what happens in cases where creators fail to comply with such regulations:

> For example, the range of content used to be wider, but now they [YouTube] restrict some content. … violence is forbidden anyway. In case [there is] even the slightest thing in your video that can partake of violence, YouTube does not remove your video, but … its recommendation algorithm … does not recommend you in others' videos, display on the homepage. Only those who subscribe to your channel can view it in their feed.

Uğur's account above exemplifies shadowbanning which is a user-generated term to describe how SMPs hide inappropriate content based on their vaguely written content policies by reducing their visibility and therefore engage in "a form of light and secret censorship" (Are, 2021, p. 1). Thus, failure to comply with advertiser-friendly content guidelines has an effect on algorithmic visibility as well as resulting in demonetisation or partial monetisation. Though alcohol-related content does not appear in these guidelines, creators in Turkey refrain from including alcohol into their videos. Alp, the content editor in PH-1, said, "In our case, you can't make a video like 'we tested the Belgium beers'" and he explained that the reason for this decision is to appeal to a wider audience because alcohol-related content can only draw a niche audience to their channel. The manager of PH-1 Can, furthermore, said that "By the way, I would also do content containing alcohol. I think it would be very nice". When I asked him whether he cannot or he does not produce this type of content, differently than Alp, he justified this in relation to media governance in Turkey:

> I think we cannot. So, we do not. They say either RTÜK will come, or it has come … I mean if we make content containing alcohol, I guess they make us end up owing tax debt or something. I don't know. So, we don't, and we can't. They are in the same framework.

Consequently, producing non-violent content works for YouTube because it works for advertisers; alcohol-free content works for YouTube Turkey in case the government widens the regulatory scope of online broadcasting.

The regulatory and restrictive framework in which media production takes place in Turkey, however, also extends to other legal frameworks as Yesil (2016, p. 8) points out:

> The highly politicised judiciary, through broad interpretations of the Press Law, the Internet Law, and the Broadcasting Law, as well as application of the Penal Code and Anti-Terror Law provisions, criminalises media practitioners, bans and confiscates publications, shuts down websites, and prosecutes writers, publishers, and artists.

This overall media governance context of Turkey, therefore, determines what is sayable and unsayable. As a consequence, media producers including social media users have been legally charged for various reasons such as "spreading Kurdish propaganda, harming Turkey's national security and territorial integrity, inciting hatred and enmity among the Turkish public, insulting state institutions, undermining the moral values of Turkish society, and insulting Islam and the Prophet Muhammad" (Yesil, 2016, p. 8). Thus, the AKP's restrictive internet regulations are also seen as part of a larger ideology of state suppression of social media users in Turkey (Yalkin, Kerrigan and vom Lehn, 2014). This might result in self-censoring practices among media producers in general or social media users in particular as Tanash *et al*.'s (2017) study shows. Independent creator Mert, for instance, forbears from sharing anything political and explained the primary reason as follows:

> The first reason is I am afraid … that I would be arrested, put into jail for insulting the president. … I am self-censoring. This is very bad, so terrible. I mean I am afraid to express my opinion, but I have to do this because someone

might complain about a post I made so innocent, just because s/he was annoyed with me, hated me, and very bad things could happen to me.

Considering this political context, Turkish content creators in SME might also practise self-censorship due to the state's presence in regulation of media; however, self-censoring also roots in cultural context and audience engagement which will be scrutinised in the following section.

Entertain within Culturally and Politically Acceptable Boundaries

Digital platforms "tend to set global, rather than local, standards" regarding content and thereby their "policies tend to ignore historical, cultural, and political values and sensitivities" that are vital to media production (Nieborg and Poell, 2018, p. 4285). Such standards for determining what is and is not allowed on the platforms are more likely to be American cultural standards given that the major social media providers are US-based (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018, p. 63). This leaves states with some room for enforcing national regulations to platforms. In addition to nation-states' persistent intention to regulate media explained in the previous section, media production practices of digital creators in Turkey are also governed by engagement with audiences who are culturally and politically situated subjects. Within the digital media landscape, creators who appeal to regional or local audiences "are often more precarious due to their exclusive dependency on the community" (Mehta, 2020, p. 113). A cultural context within which creators engage with their audiences' expectations is thus among the sources of localised precarity.

YouTube creators, like other creative and cultural producers, cannot be certain that audiences will like their creative outputs; thus, "at the heart of any creative venture there is a nugget of precarity that drives not just the work, but also the larger social context of media work, and informs decision-making processes throughout" (Elefante and Deuze, 2012, p. 12). Whether or not audiences like any media content they consume depends on the sociocultural context in which audiences are situated; likewise, content of any media might mirror the sociocultural values of producers (Rohn, 2009). Hence, as Punathambekar and Mohan (2019, p. 216) state, "localisation also rests on an elusive notion of 'cultural fit' and the history of global media is littered with efforts by media companies to produce content that resonates with audiences

rooted in particular social and cultural milieus". In this sense, keeping audiences happy with an attention to cultural fit has been a feature of even the most liberal of media systems. Achieving this, however, is much harder within the current media environment where there is "an increased array of content options to be provided across an increased array of distribution platforms" and thereby an increased audience fragmentation (Napoli, 2012, p. 81). In the case of Turkish creators, the YouTube audience is fragmented due to language constraints in the first place as discussed in Chapter 5. In order to compete for audience attention and to avoid further fragmentation of the YouTube audience, creators' efforts are characterised by self-censorship as cultural and political sensitivities of their audiences set certain limitations on their video production practices.

Studies focusing outside of the Anglo-centric and English-speaking world have demonstrated how the labour of influencers or digital creators is performed in the nexus of market, and cultural politics of state and society. Limkangvanmongkol and Abidin (2019, p. 96), for instance, demonstrate that Thai influencers "enact hybrid forms of self-presentation to reconcile tensions between local cultural norms and international industry practices". Cunningham, Craig and Lv (2019), furthermore, highlight the ways in which Chinese livestreamers' practices and experiences of precarity are shaped by not only the restrictive state's regulations but also the sociocultural values of their fan communities. In a similar vein, to secure their place in the competitive video marketplace, Turkish creators interviewed in this study pay particular attention to the cultural and political sensitivities of Turkey and refrain from making comments on politics, religion or issues that can be considered as cultural taboos of the society. To put it differently, given that creators experience platform related precarity, those who do not want to experience audience flight and audience fragmentation and thereby lose their income, try to entertain Turkish-speaking audience within culturally and politically acceptable boundaries.

In Turkey, social polarisation over historical, cultural, and political values has a role in determining political polarisation as it is also "reproduced with the current identitarian policies of political parties" (Konda, 2019, p. 5). With relevance to this, polarisation in media, including social media, is "both a reason and a result of political polarisation" (Bilgi University Center for Migration Research, 2018, p. 5). In Turkey, some major dimensions of polarisation centre on secularity, religiousness, social

tolerance against ethnic and religious minorities such as Kurds, Alevis, Syrian refugees and rights of these groups, and terrorism (Bilgi University Center for Migration Research, 2018; Çarkoğlu and Toprak, 2007; Konda, 2019). Based on the most recent study by Konda (2019, p. 76), "Turkey feels more distant towards homosexuals, atheists, HDP [Halkların Demokratik Partisi/Peoples' Democratic Party – Left-wing pro-Kurdish party in Turkey] voters, alcohol drinkers and those, who participated in the Gezi Park protests". While these issues remain controversial and polarise the society, producing SME content without touching upon them emerges as a strategy of Turkish YouTube creators as these socio-cultural and political sensitivities also operate as factors shaping audience fragmentation regarding media consumption. The research participants pointed out specific cases which explicate how they address these issues in producing media on YouTube.

As mentioned earlier, crimes against Atatürk such as insult and defamation is one significant issue governing the Turkish mediascape. In relation to this, Alp, the content editor in PH-1, gave these examples:

> It is never clear who will be lynched from what. That's why there is always the fear of being lynched, unfortunately. … For example, there is an Atatürk picture on the money, you know, we don't have any content where the money falls on the ground. ... We do not even use a quarter gold coin. Once I said … let's melt 8-10 quarter gold coins and make a YouTube play button from gold. There is an Atatürk picture on it. How are we going to melt it? Things like that.

Although his point is not related to making any verbal comments about Atatürk, it demonstrates that he pays particular attention even to the symbolic meanings of representations and actions within a video. As he pointed out, anything that might be symbolically interpreted in the wrong way can pave the way for "a digital culture of lynching" which indicates targeting and attacking someone online (Bulut and Yörük, 2017). Since some creators feel insecurity of digital lynching, they think indirect and symbolic defamatory signs when producing content, for example.

Can, the manager of PH-1, raised another concern related to the Kurdish issue and representation of the Kurdish flag[5]:

> I do not have any problem with Kurds; however, I mean you got to know people's problems. Turks … go crazy when yellow, red, and green come side by side, for example. That is why, for example, if we are to do something, to do an experiment, yellow, red, and green do not come side by side … in our videos. You have such troubles. One will say that … [he] has made the Kurdish flag. Am I going to deal with it? They will then share it somewhere on Twitter, on Instagram with the Kurdish flag behind it and so on. So, we [act] by thinking 5 steps beyond and coming back from there, at least I am.

Since he envisages the possible circulation of inaccurate ways of representing him and his channel on social media, he is attentive to such issues.

Moreover, as the majority of the Turkish population are Muslim, religious matters are also important in shaping creators' practices. Independent creator Elif mentioned how her practices are affected during Ramadan which is a month of fasting according to the Islamic calendar:

> I think Ramadan is a topic that YouTubers in Turkey generally hesitate because they [audiences] make some sense out of everything you do. For example, … I will shoot a video on coffee for a brand partnership, and it will be broadcast on the first day of Ramadan, but of course I shoot the video and taste the coffee when I am not fasting. So, I said to the brand, is it okay to say that I made this video before Ramadan at the very beginning because I know I will be lynched otherwise. … I always include food in the videos like I cook … In that sense, Ramadan really bring pressure to bear. During Ramadan and quarantine, you have to produce something in the house and eating is forbidden.

In her experience, sensitivity to religious matters especially during this specific month has challenged her in terms of finding new content ideas considering her need to keep regular uploads to YouTube to maintain algorithmic visibility. During this month, I

[5] The Kurdish question which is a major geopolitical issue in Turkey's history refers to the long-lasting debate over the political, cultural, and linguistic rights of the Kurdish population living in Turkey; see Cornell (2001) and Küçük (2019) for more information. In the interview excerpt below, Can refers to the red, green, and yellow colours of the Kurdish flag which represents the Kurdish political movement.

have also observed that PH-1's channels adapt their upload schedule to the time of fast-breaking if their scheduled content is food related, and those videos received comments from audiences demonstrating their appreciation for this practice.

Lastly, producing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) related content has always been a sensitive issue in the Turkish mediascape as previously shown with the example of Netflix cancelling its new series as a consequence of RTÜK regulations. Given that the members of LGBTI community are among the ones facing marginalisation in Turkey, making LGBTI relatable content potentially results in drawing hateful reactions and a fragmentation of audience. Independent creator Mert's account below exemplifies how he pays attention to and tackles this issue:

> I will make a movie recommendation video, for example. … I cannot suggest 5 or 10 LGBTI movies. Would I recommend? Yes. There is no problem for me. Would they lynch? Let them. Would they say he recommended gay movies to children? Let them say. Yet, in order not to draw reaction, I do this: If I am going to recommend 10 films, I select 2 [LGBTI] ones. … I tell it as a love story and do not say the names of the characters, their gender. … Let them see when they watch. I do not care. … So, it is necessary to pay some attention to such things.

Correspondingly, content regulation is actualised not only through politicised state organisations like RTÜK but also self-censoring to comply with socio-cultural and political sensitivities of audiences.

Even if one thinks that the channel's audiences are like-minded, he/she might still practice self-censorship. Ilgın, the production coordinator in PH-3, gave a paradoxical account:

> Of course, we do not practice self-censorship. … We think that our audience generally coincide with our … sociocultural situation … but you can fall in front of someone at any time, the featured ones can be your video and that's why we proceed by thinking about them in the post-production process. There are things that we trim in editing.

Then she explained what kind of things they remove in the editing process: “Things related to the sacred [values] of the society like religion or about political figures who are in power”. Though they film their content maintaining freedom of expression, they then apply censorship in the editing process because the platform’s algorithmic curation may suggest their content to anyone.

In relation to the practices of censorship, Barış, the video head in PH-4, also confirmed that the country’s political and cultural contexts affect their media production:

> It has a 100% effect ... So, we are not free just because we are doing business on the internet. Of course, we are censored; of course, we practice self-censorship; of course, we sometimes get dogpiled politically. Therefore, our channel or any YouTuber’s [channel] is not much different from any television channel.

It might be easily assumed that creators have relative freedom regarding media production on digital platforms in comparison to traditional broadcasting. What Barış describes, however, highlights that their practices actually resemble television broadcasting within the political and cultural contexts of Turkey.

Creators’ self-regulation can also be extended to refraining from sharing videos when major incidents occur such as bomb attacks on civilians, an increase in the number of martyrs, or an earthquake. The content editor in PH-1 Alp said, “At one stage, there were a lot of bombs continually exploding somewhere. … We do not post a video that day, for example” since the practice of entertaining people during such events is in contradiction to the socio-cultural values of the Turkish society. Alp’s co-creator, Can, also mentioned the same point by highlighting the importance of this for their income:

> When there is mourning, terrorist [attack] or something, you cannot upload a video. When you upload a video, … [audiences] react. What does it have to do with this? I mean life on TV goes on. … [TV] puts the Turkish flag, a black ribbon. Life goes on. During the time of terror, we do not want to upload a video as well since we are making entertainment videos, but what should we do? … Income from AdSense needs to be generated. [Video] maybe sponsored that day. There are really strange dynamics.

This sensitivity to local context, therefore, may cause a disruption to their routine upload schedule and may thereby affect their AdSense income. Such changes in the uploading schedule also impact their place in the competitive video marketplace. If the video scheduled for that day is sponsored, for example, they need to get in contact with the sponsor to set a new date to upload. In that case, when referring to their similar stand in those days, independent creators Mert and Elif mentioned that brands are also prone to changing upload dates to protect their public image. This practice, however, serves creators' economically driven aims as they keep clear of unfavourable reactions from their audiences by preferring not to post a video in such circumstances. It is, thus, important to consider the effect of audiences being a product of a specific culture on creators' labour practices.

It should be noted that these dynamics shaping Turkish creators' experiences are not exclusive to the Turkish context. In other words, considerations of audience tastes, and beliefs and perhaps self-censorship do similarly play out in the work of Irish YouTube creators but are not recognised or emerge as concerns in their narratives about their work. The absence of such narratives might be because of the liberal political context and a possibility of reaching a wider audience due to language. Also, all Turkish participants are full-time creators whose main income comes from YouTubing, whereas Irish participants have other income sources as most of them could not secure a liveable income from YouTubing. In parallel with this, for Turkish creators, the desire to maintain their economic gain may make their work more dependent on such factors. Therefore, more research is needed to understand how such factors also shape the Irish creators' experiences of YouTubing.

Consequently, in YouTube production, despite being a global consumption environment, self-censorship may actually increase value as it speaks to audiences that can be monetised but may also mean culturally risky content cannot be created and monetised. Producing mass-consumed entertainment content on YouTube necessitates self-censorship to reduce the uncertainty of audience flight and social lynching in case of insensitivity to sociocultural and political values. Creating socially acceptable entertainment content without touching upon such sensitivities emerges as a substantial strategy of creators. In doing so, they might appeal to a general audience with consistent characteristics and avoid fragmentation of their existing audiences. This, on the one hand, demonstrates the effects of cultural context on media production

and on the other hand, reflects the norms of broadcast television which is supposedly overturned in the abundance of digital media production.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the localisation dynamics of platformed content creation on YouTube by looking at two different national contexts. Each case illuminated different dynamics to document the specificity of geographic conditions in making YouTubing precarious. The case of Irish creators revealed how YouTubing in a small country where there is a small community of creators and a lack of supportive initiatives to foster the creator community might be restricting in terms of building a large audience base despite the platform's affordance of global content distribution. The case of Turkish creators demonstrated that there is, though, a wider range of recognised local factors shaping precarious labour conditions. Creators' precarity experiences are vastly determined by various local factors including the unstable nature of the Turkish economy, restrictive internet regulations of the country, as well as political and cultural values of the society. To explain these further, the chapter first examined the localisation of precarity through the relation between advertising and the state of the economy which results in lower YouTube revenues for Turkish creators. Second, it laid out the internet regulatory framework of Turkey and pointed out that the restrictive internet governance of the country affects content decisions of YouTube creators within the interwoven dynamics of formal and 'stated' censorship. Lastly, the effects of sensitivity to cultural and political contexts on content creation were examined. It is underscored that creators' relative autonomy in digital media production might be undone by the precarity of the labour that incentivises them to be conservative in order to reach the widest audience.

As described in this chapter, Irish and Turkish creators see themselves as made precarious by pointing out different local factors. Irish creators do not see themselves as being 'othered' in the same way as Turkish creators may understand themselves. A relatively stable economy and democracy, the assumed liberal cultural politics of the Irish state, the possibility of forming linkages to the hegemonic version of YouTube through language and culture might be some reasons to explain this difference. While these issues emerged more organically in my discussion with Turkish YouTube

creators, there are similar dynamics at work in the practices of the Irish participants, but they remained unmarked.

When examined in the context of an authoritarian state where internet regulation might be more obviously managed, the effect of political context becomes more apparent. This is, however, at work everywhere. In this sense, it is important to not frame Turkey (or any other authoritarian state such as China or Russia) as the only place where such dynamics are relevant. Therefore, I do not claim any uniqueness to the existence of these dynamics. The Chinese government's increasing regulation of content (Craig, Lin and Cunningham, 2021), the increasing deplatforming of sexual content (Blunt *et al.*, 2020; Tiidenberg and van der Nagel, 2020), and the recent laws such as The Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) and Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) introduced in the US which made platforms liable for sexual content (Paasonen, Jarrett and Light, 2019) are some examples highlighed in the recent literature.

Overall, the chapter has argued that it is necessary to foreground the importance of studying the labour practices of YouTube creators by acknowledging that their labour is not only governed by economic practices but also by political and cultural practices, but more importantly to recognise that these are dependent on the specific geopolitical context of creation. While YouTube is a global medium, and precarity is globally experienced, there are still localised dynamics that must be considered when attempting to understand the labour of YouTube creators. The localised trends in two different national contexts illuminated in this chapter are significant as they might also explain other YouTube cultures.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

YouTube (n.d.-j) describes its impact over the past 16 years with these words: “People all over the world have used YouTube to follow their passions, connect with others and develop economic opportunities for themselves and their communities”. The company evidently celebrates its impact by recognising YouTube as a platform wherein people can merge their passions and interpersonal connections with economic gains. Similar to this celebratory account of the platform, Irish and Turkish media have also reported the success and fame of YouTubers in each country. However, it becomes evident through this study that these creators experience various challenges associated with the platform’s mediation of their work as well as their local production contexts. By acknowledging that YouTube’s creator economy is precarious and also shaped by geographic contexts in which people engage in YouTubing, this thesis has thoroughly explored the specific creative digital labour practices of Irish and Turkish YouTube creators. It has identified how content creators form their professional identities, how the dynamics of platformed cultural production create precarious working and economic conditions for creators as well as how national contexts of cultural production affect the way creators experience precarity.

To conceptualise YouTubing as the object of this study, the vital founding premise was that it forms a complex network of production relations which consists of various actors who are dependent on each other in multiple ways. This network includes creators who produce and distribute creative content via YouTube; the platform itself with its sociotechnical affordances and policies which govern the labour practices it mediates; advertisers who fund the creator economy; audiences whose attention is sold to advertisers while they are enjoying creative content on the platform; MCNs as cultural intermediaries which have helped YouTube to professionalise the field of SME; PHs as new generation, small scale media companies, producing content via a team of creators and distributing via YouTube; and nation states with their laws regulating the internet broadcasting and their wide sociocultural environments that impose norms to police creative content. Through this framing, as Baym (2021, p. viii) also mentions, “we can begin to see the actors—human, corporate, and technical—and

the connections between them". While this research considered YouTube creators as main actors in the field of SME, it also paid attention to their connections with other actors who shape their labour practices.

The way I conceptualised YouTubing and selecting YouTube creators as main agents of this hybrid cultural and economic activity required a mixed methods approach. I gave an overview of various methodological frameworks to undertake a study on platformed content creation. Political economy studies were useful in this research and provided the background understanding of how YouTube's business model establishes power asymmetries between the platform owners, creators, states, and advertisers. However, such studies neither focus on specific platforms or labour practices of media production nor on any particular national context, and more importantly do not rely on creators' own accounts regarding their creative work. Furthermore, studies using textual analysis aim to understand creative digital labour through representations creators make such as their video products. Therefore, they neglect the multimodal textual formation of the platform and pay no attention to what happens behind-the-scenes. Since this study is more interested in the labour process of YouTubing and the working conditions of creators, employing methods from an ethnographic framework worked best to establish the necessary data. Interviewing YouTube creators helped me to access their own thoughts, beliefs, interests, and actions regarding their media production practices and conducting an observational study while creators' filming their videos provided a more detailed understanding of the labour process involved in YouTubing. Lastly, by acknowledging YouTube as a multimodal text, my analysis of the interview data was informed by the walkthrough method which helped me to identify the platform affordances and regulatory frameworks that shape or constrain the labour practices of creators.

Despite having emerged less than two decades ago, YouTubing has evolved at an accelerated pace. To situate the creative practices of Irish and Turkish YouTubers within the SME economy, it was first necessary to examine thoroughly the evolution of YouTubing from homemade videos into a precarious media career. Although earlier technological advancements such as the accessibility of consumer grade cameras have facilitated homemade videos, the platformisation of cultural production in the digital age has made distribution easier and provided creators with a chance to access audiences and advertisers. Within the ecology of platformed content creation,

YouTube has successfully integrated UGC into its platform economy via first monetising UGC in exchange for free access to users, and second by affording creators tools to monetise their own creative outputs such as its partner program. This second aspect has resulted in the creation of professionalised and precarious cultural workers in YouTube's platform economy.

As this research specifically looked at the labour of these cultural workers in the case of YouTube, I described the way I conceptualise the platform. Rather than seeing YouTube as a commercial platform which merely mediates economic exchanges between advertisers and creators, I framed YouTube as a hybrid space wherein different forms of values are produced via diverse user activities. Drawing on the literature, I demonstrated how YouTube becomes a hybrid commercial platform by allowing its users to earn cultural capital via distributing their creative outputs, gain social capital through networking with other users, and form political capital by facilitating the dissemination of political views. Within this hybrid context, however, the platform also affords tools to translate these into economic gain. The labour of YouTube creators, therefore, not only requires production, distribution and promotion of their videos but also necessitates various kinds of immaterial labour to complete the capital translation process and make a career through the platform.

Furthermore, I framed YouTube creators as platform workers who work in similar ways to workers in different sectors because YouTubing shares many characteristics with contemporary forms of platform labour such as nonstandard commercial relations with the platform and algorithmic management tools that shape labour practices. Also, the labour of YouTube creators as cultural workers in the platform economy is similar to the work in the CCIs which requires flexibility, affective attachment to one's job, individualisation and long working hours. In this sense, a YouTuber like a creative worker may correspond with the ideal form of worker who undertakes self-monitoring to identify his/her responsibilities, practices self-regulation to minimise risks, and engages in self-entrepreneurship to create individualised possibilities (McRobbie, 2016). Since YouTubers' labour reflects these two dominant trends in labour relations, it is important to understand working for YouTube in relation to these wider dynamics.

As this research took YouTube creators as main agents in the field of SME, it was important to look closely at their self-descriptions regarding this hybrid cultural and

economic activity. Therefore, I focused on how creators form their professional identities and engage in DIY career making on and beyond YouTube, arguing that forming one's professional identity as a YouTuber does not operate on the basis of a simple equation. That is, there are various factors affecting how the research participants described their practices of YouTubing. It is therefore unproductive to situate creators' practices into binary categories such as amateur/professional and commercial/non-commercial. Rather, I demonstrated the diversity in professional identities the research participants claim. Including research participants working in PHs make a significant contribution to understand the professional identity of YouTube creators. This is because, as opposed to the dominant understanding of YouTubing as an individualised production process, YouTubing in PHs depends on a division of labour with flexible role-taking and this ultimately affects how those employed by PHs define their work. Despite being at different career stages and having a wide range of backgrounds, motivations, skills, and experiences, YouTube creators who participated in this project had something in common: They needed to be flexible in shifting between different professional identities and types of employment relations in order to make a media career on and beyond YouTube. This is because it is hard to imagine or maintain a single career path towards being a professional creator due to existing or future uncertainties.

After stating that making a media career from YouTubing is precarious due to existing or future uncertainties, I explored some of the reasons behind this by focusing on the dynamics of platformisation. YouTube as one actor organising the process of cultural intermediation has situated content creators precariously into its creator economy. That is, there is an observable power asymmetry between the platform which governs the labour practices via top-down policies and everchanging non-human actors like algorithms and creators who do not have a voice in the way the platform mediates their labour practices. I highlighted that precarity in the case of YouTubing stems from media change specifically in the areas including the platform's regulations, the algorithmic culture, SME trends, and competitive platform ecosystem. I also focused on how this precarity shapes creators' experience of work and foregrounded that the labour of YouTube creators requires developing risk management strategies, regular content uploads paying attention to trending topics, developing platform mobility, and not joining MCNs.

Within the ecology of platformed content creation, MCNs therefore emerged as other important actors to whom this study has drawn attention. These new media intermediaries played a significant role in facilitating YouTube's accelerated evolution in the SME industry in terms of professionalising its creators. Despite their relative success in the earlier times of their integration in the field of SME, I discussed how the SME industry is precarious for MCNs and how MCNs, in turn, create precarious working conditions for creators. Creators, though, recognise the failure of MCNs in providing their promised assistance via either their own experiences or building this knowledge through the narratives of other creators. Therefore, most research participants preferred disintermediation as a strategy for risk management, while some try to mimic the MCN model within their small community of creators as a way to increase their income. This adds further complexity to how we understand the professionalisation of YouTubing in the SME industry.

Despite enabling global production and reception of media, the YouTube creator economy operates within national contexts, which makes nation states important actors. Therefore, the precarisation of platformed content creation cannot solely be understood by considering media change in the context of the platform. In relation to this, I focused more closely on how the experiences of labour and economic precarity of creators are localised depending on geographic specificities. With the concept of the localisation of precarity, I aimed to draw attention to the complexity of relations between platforms, content creator labour and local contexts. Looking at two different national contexts was illuminating for this aim. Although Irish creators do not see themselves as made precarious in the same way Turkish participants do, they still feel precarious in reference to the small population size of the country and small community of creators. They consider the creative culture and economy in the US or the UK to be more splendent and rewarding. According to their beliefs, if they were in one of those core countries, they would get a bigger audience, find more opportunities, and perhaps develop a more sustainable career. Turkish creators, on the other hand, pointed to more diverse factors ranging from the unstable nature of the Turkish economy to restrictive internet regulations of the country and to the normative constraints on their content production coming with sociocultural and political sensitivities of their local audiences.

However, it should be noted that the absence of narratives about sociocultural and political context in the case of Irish creators does not mean the absence of impact. To illustrate some of the challenges coming from creators' local production contexts, I would like to mention two events which have taken place in the recent past in Ireland and Turkey. In September 2020, two Irish creative entrepreneurs formed an Irish Hype House which included a total of ten Irish creators who collaboratively produce social media content. Shortly after the house's launch, creators drew a lot of criticism because of forming the house during the coronavirus pandemic despite complying the government's health and safety guidelines and due to the age gap between its members even though all members were over 18 years old. The oldest member of the house who is 26 years old "received a torrent of online abuse, where he was labelled a 'creep', and 'predatory', leading to his decision to leave the House" (Schofield, 2020). In December 2021, three Turkish YouTubers were arrested only because they were doing street interviews with random people about their economic concerns amid the current financial crisis in the country (Dodgson, 2021). After the trial, they "have been released to house arrest with an international travel ban by the Criminal Judgeship of Peace" (*Bianet*, 2021). These two cases offer good examples of how national contexts affect creators' labour practices that has been the main focus of this thesis and suggest that there are ongoing and ever-changing dynamics to be observed.

Considering all these points made in this dissertation, the contributions of this study to the field of platformed cultural production are both conceptual and empirical. The way I mobilised YouTubing was fruitful to this study, leading to particular ways of thinking about the labour of YouTube creators within a network of production relations. More specifically, I suggest that the processes of production and distribution of YouTube videos rest upon the complex web of relations among individual, corporate, governmental, and technical agents. The conceptualisation of the research object therefore necessitated the use of interdisciplinary literature such as political economy of social media to uncover power asymmetries between different agents; ethnographies of platformed content creation to access creators' own experiences; production studies to highlight the importance of local media production contexts; and studies of platform work and labour to discover shared working conditions between content creators and other platform workers.

Based on all these, I contextualised precarious YouTubing not only in the context of platform affordances and regulatory frameworks but also in different geopolitical contexts. Thus, this study empirically contributes to the field, particularly in terms of how YouTubing is performed in the nexus of the competitive field of SME and cultural politics of state and society. The research findings revealed that the labour of YouTubing is governed by not only economic but also cultural, political, and linguistic factors, which all depend on geopolitical contexts of media production and distribution. The study highlighted that there are always changing dynamics that are rooted in the ways relations of production are formed in the processes of YouTubing. This creates precarious working conditions for YouTube creators, but also makes them risk-bearing creative agents who engage in self-governance and DIY career making on and beyond YouTube.

Last but not the least, conducting this research in two underrepresented national contexts is another significant contribution to the field. While there is a growing body of literature focusing on creator cultures in the USA, the UK, China, and India, the experiences of Irish and Turkish YouTube creators have not found much place in academic research. The ecological perspective adopted in this study has revealed various challenges faced by Irish and Turkish creators stemming from their local production cultures. While this study contributes to the YouTube literature by giving voice to Irish and Turkish creators' accounts, its findings might also illuminate other YouTube production cultures.

Limitations and Future Research

One key limitation of this study that must be recognised is the limited observation and sample size caused by the coronavirus pandemic. More work is certainly needed to understand both of the national contexts explored in this research. In the case of Ireland, most research participants were not full-time creators as they had other income sources from freelancing or full-time jobs. Incorporating the experiences of those who have secured a larger (international) audience base across different genres and thereby are making a liveable income from YouTubing would be fruitful. This would bring an important insight into the impact of geopolitical context on their labour and how they manage their followers at (inter)national level when creators merge their affective

motivations for YouTubing with the maintenance and perhaps increase of their monetary gain.

In the case of Turkey, the research subjects were producing content in the entertainment and beauty & lifestyle genres. Even in their case, it was observable that they pay attention to the sociocultural and political sensitivities of their local audiences to mitigate the risks of economic precarity. It would be valuable to include the narratives of Turkish YouTube creators who produce content on (identity) politics and current affairs. This would provide a more comprehensive picture to understand how the geopolitical context affect their content decisions and how creator – audience relations are managed locally.

In addition to expanding the sample size and thoroughly investigating the factors such as motivation and genre, increasing the number of observations would further illuminate the creative production process of YouTubing in both national contexts. The limited observation I conducted in Istanbul was indubitably important to understand the division of labour in YouTubing and co-creator relations in PHs. More observational study which incorporates multiple video production and post-production sites in the case of both individual creators and PHs is needed. This would be beneficial to grasp better not only different production modes of YouTubing but also relations of production. While the former would reveal division of labour in the production process and their skills, the latter would elucidate how creators think about the idea of audiences, regulatory frameworks at the platform and national levels and advertisers' interests in their content decisions. Despite the limited observation and sample size, this research made a significant contribution to the YouTube literature considering its focus on national contexts shaping YouTube production.

Another limitation that should be noted is that the study left out the gendered aspect of media production. Even though I maintained the gender balance among research participants, the research data was not rich enough to make conclusions about the gendered dynamics of platformed content creation. For that reason, a future study would especially focus on the role of gender in PHs which employ a division of labour in the processes of media production. This would generate significant results concerning whether media production in the SME industry maintain the gendered division of labour and inequal working conditions that exist in more established media

industries for women. It is also worth noting how this might be shaped by geopolitical contexts as gender inequality varies across different countries.

Besides further investigation of both national contexts including the gender variable, I want to mention other promising future avenues of research drawing on my observations from this dissertation. This study specifically focused on creators' practices of YouTubing; it is however hard to operate on a single platform due to the precarious nature of platformed content creation that is examined in detail throughout the thesis. Creators operate in multiple platforms to manage their communities, promote their work as well as diversify their income streams. One possible future investigation may focus more on cross platform media production and distribution dynamics to further explore how creators manage their creative practices regarding different media forms and affordances in various SMPs.

This study foregrounded the importance of local contexts of media production for creators. When asked about what would be different if they were YouTube creators in other countries, some of the Irish and Turkish creators romanticised being in the UK or USA where they could build larger audiences and thereby generate more income. Some of the Irish YouTube creators interviewed for this project have since moved to other countries such as the UK and USA on the way to build their social media careers. This demonstrates the significance of national contexts as Irish creators might develop international mobility due to advantages of the language they speak as well as the relative stability of the Irish economy compared to the Turkish economy. Considering the necessity of platform mobility as a risk management strategy within the ever-changing competitive platform economy as mentioned in Chapter 5, an additional investigation of international mobility is needed to understand how the relatively underdeveloped nature of SME industry in those countries affect creators' career development.

In this study, I examined how the algorithmic culture of YouTube which affords and restricts visibility for certain content contributes to the precarious nature of platformed content creation. For creators who attempt to monetise their creative outputs, maintaining visibility on SMPs, therefore, necessitates being responsive to entertainment trends and optimising creative content for search and recommendation algorithms (Bishop, 2018b). Creators' effort to make content which is "algorithmically

recognisable" gives rise to the repetition of certain elements such as trending topics, video titles, thumbnail designs, tags and so on (Gillespie, 2014). This research is suggestive that the creative milieu of media production on YouTube is shaped by the premeditated imitation of trending media artefacts. In other words, building up new ideas and forms of representation and expression is dependent on creators' strategic responses to uncertainty regarding visibility and also the "waves of collective imitation" driven by collective affects on SMPs (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016). Drawing on the concept of "distributed creativity" which means that "creative action is distributed between multiple actors, creations, places and times" (Glăveanu, 2014, p. 2), a future study could fruitfully focus on how creativity is distributed in the field of YouTube production. This requires the consideration of a network of actors such as that adopted in this dissertation: creators and their use of audience data, audiences, platforms and their policies, algorithms, as well as nation-states which shape contexts of media production, in an attempt to understand the algorithmic turn in media production and how creative agency operates in conjunction with algorithmic agency (Napoli, 2014).

As this research has underscored, media change is a significant dynamic of platformed content creation. Much has changed since I started this project in September 2017. This even becomes observable from the current lives and career stages of some of the research participants. In relation to this, one key observation is that the convergence of old and new media plays a significant role in shaping the contemporary entertainment industry and creating its future (Jenkins, 2006). For example, in the context of Turkey, textual formats of SME have been adopted by other digital platforms that normally stream traditional media content such as films and TV series. One of the media companies in Turkey, Acun Medya, launched a brand-new subscription-based video on-demand platform namely Exxen in January 2021. The platform has bought popular video formats that are native to YouTube and created by famous Turkish YouTube creators to broadcast television. These creators either migrated to Exxen or started to work for that platform as well. Also, another Turkey-based media platform GAIN, which brands itself as new generation content platform, was launched in December 2020. GAIN also streams professionally generated content starring traditional celebrities, but its uniqueness also comes from its textual format as it streams 10-15 minutes length short videos converging to a YouTube style (Sharpe,

2021). Considering this context of media convergence, a future study would usefully focus on how this might affect the career development of YouTube creators as precarious workers in the SME industry.

Final Remarks

After a comprehensive examination of the existing literature on platformed content creation and specifically on YouTubing, the value of this research comes from understanding YouTubing within a complex network of production relations; framing the labour of YouTubing as part of broader labour trends, instead of marginalising it; and looking at digital labour practices and the real challenges of such kinds of work in two different national contexts, instead of homogenising it under a global platform. This study demonstrated that YouTubing has a precarious nature which shapes creators' working lives and how they form and maintain their professional identities. When creators' media production and distribution practices are only examined in the context of the platform architecture, it is more likely to homogenise the conditions that makes YouTubing precarious. In other words, from this perspective, the practices of Irish and Turkish creators show notable similarities to those of other creators around the world. These similarities can be observable when creators' experience with the platform regulations and its algorithm, SME trends, MCNs and their strategies to minimise the risk of economic precarity are considered.

Part of this precarious nature, however, comes from geopolitical contexts that are mostly overlooked in the existing literature. This raised the necessity of addressing how platformed content creation operates in national contexts. In other words, YouTubing as a form of creative digital labour takes place in the internet factory as it is mediated by a global digital platform but also depends on geographical contexts of creation. Hence, this study looked at YouTubing in two different national contexts in which different internet governance regimes, diverse economic, political, and cultural factors and different languages play a role in shaping the wider media landscape. This approach revealed other factors that make YouTubing precarious drawing from creators' local production contexts. This is because I was able to focus on how YouTube's monetisation tools depend on the state of the advertising industry in national economies, how YouTubing is mediated by not only the platform's regulations but also broader local internet governance regimes, and how creator's

content decisions change when they connect with the idea of audience whose media consumption is shaped by their sociocultural, religious, and political sensitivities. As a result, this study developed an important insight suggesting the importance of focusing on geopolitical contexts within the network of actors.

YouTubing continues to evolve depending on changes in relations of production among various agents, regulatory frameworks at platform, national or regional level, and trends within the competitive platform ecosystem. All these changes will ultimately affect YouTube creators' labour practices and their experiences of work. The perspective that I have adopted in this study has also a potential to contribute to further research which will aim to understand the impact of these changes on the labour of YouTubers.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Information Sheet for Interview Subjects

Maynooth University
Department of Media Studies
PhD Research Project Information Sheet

Purpose of the Study. I am Tuğçe Bidav, a doctoral student, in the Department of Media Studies at Maynooth University. As part of the requirements for my PhD programme, I am undertaking a research study under the supervision of Dr Kylie Jarrett and Dr Sarah Arnold. The study is concerned with creative digital labour practices of Irish and Turkish YouTubers. This study is designed to address how those practices are negotiated and shaped in particular underrepresented national contexts such as Ireland and Turkey.

What will the study involve? The study will involve a one-to-one interview of about 1-hour and/or observation of your video production and distribution practices. You will be asked to describe your YouTube video production and distribution practices, experiences as a YouTuber in a particular national context, and your relationships with multi-channel networks, co-creators and audiences. The observation will be of your production and distribution practices and may involve the researcher seeking clarity about certain processes. Duration of observations will be determined by the nature of the practices under observation. You will not be asked to perform for this study any task other than your normal working practices during the observations; rather your practices of video production and distribution will be observed.

Who has approved this study? This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics committee. You may have a copy of this approval if you request it.

Why have you been asked to take part? You have been asked to take part because you are an active content creator on YouTube. I would value your participation in this study.

Do you have to take part? You are under no obligation whatsoever to take part in this research. However, we hope that you will agree to take part and give us some of your time to participate in a one-to-one interview with the researcher and/or an observational study. It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not you would like to take part. If you decide to do so, you will be asked to sign a consent form. You will be given a copy of this form and the information sheet for your own records. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and/or to withdraw your information up until September 2020 as the research findings are analysed. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not

affect your relationships with Maynooth University.

What information will be collected? Some personally identifiable data such as your name, age, gender, location, personal email, personal contact number, as well as some sensitive personal data such as your work culture, political view, employment status, income and multi-channel network affiliation will be collected.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential? All information that is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept confidential. No names of participants or their employers will be identified at any time. All hard copy information will be held in a locked cabinet at the researchers' place of work, electronic information will be encrypted and held securely on MU PC or servers and will be accessed only by Tuğçe Bidav as the researcher and Dr Kylie Jarrett and Dr Sarah Arnold as the supervisors. No information will be distributed to any other unauthorised individual or third party. If you so wish, the data that you provide can also be made available to you at your own discretion.

'It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.'

What will happen to the information which you give? All the information you provide will be kept at Maynooth University in such a way that it will not be possible to identify you. On completion of the research, the data will be retained on the MU server. After ten years, all data will be destroyed by Tuğçe Bidav as the principal investigator (PI). Manual data will be shredded confidentially, and electronic data will be reformatted or overwritten by the PI in Maynooth University.

What will happen to the results? The research will be written up and presented as a doctoral dissertation, discussed at internal group meetings, presented at National and International conferences and may be published in scientific journals. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part? I don't envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part.

What if there is a problem? At the end of the interview and/or observation, I will discuss with you how you found the experience and how you are feeling. If you experience any distress following the interview and/or observation or if you feel the research has not been carried out as described above, you may contact my supervisors indicated below.

Any further queries? If you need any further information before or after this research, you can contact me or my supervisors:

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If you agree to take part in the study, please complete and sign the consent form overleaf.

Thank you for taking the time to read this.

Appendix B: Consent Form for Interview Subjects

Consent Form

I……agree to participate in Tuğçe Bidav's research study titled Creative Digital Labour Practices of Irish and Turkish YouTubers.

Please tick each statement below:

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally & in writing. I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily. ☐

I am participating voluntarily. ☐

I agree to participate in an interview. ☐

I agree to participate in the observational research. ☐

I give permission for my interview with Tuğçe Bidav to be audio-recorded. ☐

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while I am participating. ☐

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data right up until such time as the research findings are analysed [September 2020]. ☐

It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access it on request. ☐

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet ☐

I understand that my data, in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications if I give permission below: ☐

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

I agree for my data to be used for further research projects ☐

I do not agree for my data to be used for further research projects ☐

Signed……. Date…….

Participant Name in block capitals ……...

I the undersigned have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a manner that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

Signed……. Date…….

Researcher Name in block capitals ……...

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@mu.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

For your information the Data Controller for this research project is Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Maynooth University Data Protection officer is Ann McKeon in Humanity house, room 17, who can be contacted at ann.mckeon@mu.ie. Maynooth University Data Privacy policies can be found at https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/data-protection.

Two copies to be made: 1 for participant, 1 for PI

Appendix C: List of Interviewees in Turkey

Pseudonym	Gender	Age Range	Role	Subscribers	Interview Date & Type
Can	Male	33-35	Manager in PH-1	3M-6M	19 December 2019 (Face-to-face)
Alp	Male	36-38	Content editor in PH-1	3M-6M	19 December 2019 (Face-to-face)
Yiğit	Male	30-32	Director in PH-1 & Production manager in PH-2	3M-6M	20 December 2019 (Face-to-face)
Uğur	Male	24-26	YouTuber in PH-2	3M-6M	20 December 2019 (Face-to-face)
Deniz	Female	24-26	YouTuber in PH-2	1M-3M	20 December 2019 (Face-to-face)
Ilgın	Female	21-23	Production manager in PH-3	100K-500K	27 December 2019 (Face-to-face)
Barış	Male	30-32	Video head in PH-4	3M-6M	18 May 2020 (Online)
Mert	Male	24-26	YouTuber	100K-500K	19 May 2020 (Online)
Elif	Female	24-26	YouTuber	25K-100K	3 June 2020 (Online)

Appendix D: List of Interviewees in Ireland

Pseudonym	Gender	Age Range	Role	Subscribers	Interview Date & Type
Conor	Male	21-23	YouTuber	500-1K	20 November 2019 (Face-to-face)
Aoife	Female	21-23	YouTuber	500-1K	21 November 2019 (Face-to-face)
Roisin	Female	30-32	Production Manager in PH-5	1M-3M	22 November 2019 (Face-to-face)
Oisin	Male	21-23	YouTuber	10K-25K	12 March 2020 (Face-to-face)
Luke	Male	27-29	YouTuber	25K-100K	12 March 2020 (Face-to-face)
Barry	Male	18-20	YouTuber	10K-25K	12 May 2020 (Online)
Casey	Female	30-32	YouTuber	100K-500K	17 June 2020 (Online)