Platforms and Cultural Production

Localised precarity in social media entertainment: YouTubing in Turkey

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Abstract
This article examines precarious working conditions for YouTube content creation in Turkey. Creator studies have extensively examined creator precarity within the context of platform architectures and the broader social media entertainment industries. Instead of applying this lens to YouTubing in Turkey to highlight shared precarity experiences of Turkish creators with other YouTube production cultures, I focus on localised precarity to examine how creator labour is made less stable by geographical context. Drawing on in-depth interviews with creators, the research findings demonstrate that there are multiple sources of precarity associated with localised YouTube revenues in an unstable national economy, restrictive internet governance at nation-state level, and culturally situated creator–audience relations.

Introduction

YouTubing – the practices of producing, distributing and/or monetising video content on YouTube – has become a contemporary media career, with the platform's attempts to professionalise, formalise and regulate the field of content creation leading to the

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industrialisation of social media entertainment (SME) and precarious labour practices (Cunningham and Craig, 2019). An attempt to understand the precarious conditions of creator labour, referring to all forms of insecure, uncertain, vulnerable, unstable, unpredictable conditions of work and life (Gill and Pratt, 2008), requires consideration of a network of actors who interact with or depend on each other in multiple ways. This network includes creators who produce, distribute and/or monetise creative content via YouTube; the platform itself, with its policies and socio-technical affordances, which top-down governs the labour practices it mediates; advertisers who fund the creator economy; socioculturally situated audiences whose attention is sold to advertisers while they are enjoying creative content on the platform; multi-channel networks (MCNs) as cultural intermediaries which have helped YouTube to professionalise the field of SME; production houses (PHs) as new-generation, small-scale media companies professionally producing and distributing media content via a team of creators/media workers; and nation-states with their political economy of media, their laws regulating the internet, and their wider sociocultural environments that impose norms to police creative content. Through this framing, 'the actors – human, corporate, [governmental], and technical – and the connections between them' become observable (Baym, 2021: viii). Paying particular attention to the connections between creator labour, platform, and nation-state and to socioculturally situated creator–audience relations, this article situates YouTubing within the geographic specificities of media production, distribution, consumption, and regulation in Turkey. In doing so, it demonstrates the nuanced ways in which creator labour, mediated by a global platform like YouTube, intersects with local contexts, shaping creative content production and generating localised precarity in the experiences of Turkish creators.

To examine the precarious nature of platformed content creation, scholars of a growing interdisciplinary field of creator studies have mostly placed content creator labour within the context of platform architectures and the broader SME industries. In line with this, the existing research has examined creator precarity at platform level to understand how platforms' creator governance strategies via their policies and algorithms create uncertainties, at market level to reveal how competing for audience attention in the context of rapid changes in entertainment trends as well as audience taste fosters precarity, and at industry level to note the competitiveness in the platform ecosystem as another source of precarity (Cunningham and Craig, 2019; Duffy, 2020; Duffy et al., 2021; Glatt, 2022). When Turkish creators' YouTubing is only examined in the context of the platform architectures and the wider SME industries, the research participants' experiences show notable similarities to those of other creators around the world. Therefore, applying this framework – developed in Western contexts – to YouTubing in Turkey carries the risk of homogenising precarious working conditions for content creation, erasing diverse local factors affecting creator labour.

While YouTube is a global platform, and precarity is experienced globally, there are still localised dynamics that must be considered when attempting to understand creator labour. This is primarily because the ways multiple actors interact with or depend on each other in the processes of YouTubing are contingent upon geographic contexts. Taking this into account, research concentrating on regions other than the Anglo-American and English-speaking ones has demonstrated how creator labour

is performed in the nexus of the market and cultural politics of state and society. Scholars have addressed the emergence of the state as a powerful actor governing the Chinese SME (Craig et al., 2021), the impact of linguistic and cultural factors in shaping creators' content strategies to appeal to local or regional audiences in India (Mehta, 2020; Mohan and Punathambekar, 2019) and Thailand (Limkangvanmongkol and Abidin, 2019), as well as the significance of access to technology, which deepens inequalities in the creator economy in Kenya (Njathi, 2023). However, the ways in which these localised labour practices give rise to new precarity factors have received less attention. Building on their work, I examine localised YouTubing in Turkey to provide a comprehensive way of understanding creator precarity that is rooted in the local production cultures.

Furthermore, the existing literature has focused on self-professionalised or aspiring individual creators who are deprived of employment rights protected by law as they are not considered employees and, therefore, do not have access to social protection like health insurance, paid sick leave, minimum wage, and pensions (Poell et al., 2022). However, along with the professionalisation of YouTubing, PHs as new-generation media production companies – founded by internet entrepreneurs such as a US-based digital media company BuzzFeed, which operates across multiple platforms, or by individual YouTube creators who secured a big audience base like MrBeast – have also been included in the SME industries. Within the creator economy, PHs function as 'complementors' (Poell et al., 2022), but are different from MCNs (Lobato, 2016), talent management agencies, and other intermediaries (Stoldt et al., 2019) as their role is not to assist creators to professionalise their creative practice. Rather, they are YouTube partners who produce social media native content via a team of media workers, including creators, directors, video editors, and content editors and monetise those creative outputs like individual creators do via the YouTube Partner Programme (YPP) and external brand deals. Due to their corporate-like structure, mimicking a hierarchical and sometimes blurred division of labour in the processes of media production, they engage in consistent advertiser and/or 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. While creators generate income through/for YouTube, the platform has assigned a precarious status to both independent creators and PHs. Incorporating the experiences of managers/ founders of PHs and their formal salaried employees, who have access to some social protection that individual creators do not have, is an important aspect of this research, illuminating their shared experiences and concerns with individual creators regarding aspects of localised precarity that are beyond economic and algorithmic precarities addressed in the dominant literature.

This article situates creator labour, performed independently or in the context of PHs, in the wider political, economic, cultural, and linguistic contexts of Turkey, which requires a brief exploration of YouTube's place as well as other factors affecting media production in the country's current mediascape. YouTube has successfully penetrated the Turkish mediascape, especially after the launch of the platform's localised version in 2012, despite repeated blocking of access to the platform by the Turkish state (Bozdag, 2016). According to the latest report of the Turkish Statistical Institute (2023), the internet usage rate was 87.1% in 2023 for individuals in the 16–74 age group (this rate was 47.2% in 2012) and the second most used social media platform

by individuals is YouTube with 69.0%. There are various reasons for the platform's success, including but not limited to the country's high youth population, who adopt new technologies more quickly than older generations (Isman and Güzelsoy, 2019), access to news commentary produced by independent journalists (Zinderen, 2021), and the platform's use as 'a broadcast re-distributor', facilitating access to television content (Ildır, 2024). The introduction of the YPP with the platform's localised version has also given rise to independent creators, those working in the context of PHs, TV celebrities, and journalists generating income from YouTubing. Accordingly, YouTube's creator ecosystem contributed more than 2 billion Turkish lira to Turkey's GDP in 2021 and supported employment equivalent to more than 45,000 full-time jobs in Turkey (Oxford Economics, 2023).

Media production in Turkey, however, has always been contested, due to the industry's close connection to the state of the economy, which itself is contingent upon its crisis-prone nature, 'extra-economic coercion' practices brought by the increasingly authoritarian politics of Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has been in power since 2002, and the resulting increased informality and precarity (Kaderoğlu Bulut, 2020). Content regulation by politicised state organisations like the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK), which top-down implement the AKP's media and cultural policies, has further exacerbated the challenges faced by media workers in Turkey (Algan and Kaptan, 2023). Within this context, 'the Turkish state is a key driver of precarization' in the media industries through its legal interventions supported by its authoritarian neoliberal politics (Bulut, 2022: 152). YouTubing in Turkey cannot be examined in isolation from the larger context in which the media industries operate, because the intertwining of state regulations, cultural policies, and economic factors significantly impacts the landscape, not only for media workers in the film and television industries but also for creators and PHs in the SME industries.

Consequently, the article takes various geographic specificities into consideration, such as the wider local media landscapes shaped by economic and political factors; the country's political climate, that affects levels of access and participation; the effect of language on the global distribution of media outputs; and creator–audience relations situated in sociocultural contexts. Incorporating these geographic factors that are underrepresented in the dominant literature into the research produces new insights into how practices of a global content creator labour are performed in different localities like Turkey. The findings reveal that the preciousness of platformed content creation is shaped not only by economic but also political, cultural, and linguistic practices that are, in turn, dependent on the geographic specificities of media regulation, production, distribution, and reception.

Localised precarity

YouTube has given rise to a new era in media globalisation by allowing production, distribution, and reception of SME content on a global scale. Nonetheless, there are various 'local YouTube scenes' that have emerged with localised versions of the platform as well as with the effect of MCNs (Burgess and Green, 2018). Localised YouTubing cannot be understood by merely looking at the availability of locally relevant content, the display of

local ads in local languages targeting local audiences, the production of location-based data, and accessibility to platform resources in different languages. Studying local YouTube production cultures in relation to precarity requires more than on-platform exploration of localisation. This type of inquiry necessitates situating media work in local production landscapes and paying attention to the relationship between local and global actors, similar to an approach developed in production studies since the global dispersion of film and television productions (Mayer, 2009). Such an approach allows 'the ways particular cultural and political histories and economic policies shape working conditions, cultural values, and personal/professional networks in local production cultures' (Curtin and Sanson, 2016: 13) to be revealed. Building on this work, I argue that the same approach is also essential to understand diverse local experiences of YouTube creators. Localised YouTubing, therefore, refers to the ways in which creator labour is situated in the local context of a particular nation-state where political, economic, cultural, linguistic, and technological factors shape or constrain platformed content creation. In other words, localisation of YouTubing has more to do with where creators are based, affecting the processes of production, content decisions, and reception that are, in turn, linked to the wider local context.

My concern with the local context does not simply suggest that local production cultures provide 'raw data' that should be interpreted through the lens of Western theory (Willems, 2014: 16). I therefore make a genuine attempt at de-westernisation so as to cultivate a new theoretical approach grounded in the subjective experiences of creators in a non-Western context that are absent or overlooked in research conducted in Anglo-American contexts. For this, I coined the term 'localised precarity', referring to a broader set of insecurities and uncertainties that are rooted in the complex relationships between platforms, creator labour, and local contexts. Building on Kraidy and Murphy's (2008: 346) conceptualisation of the local, which does not exist 'in suspended opposition with the global', I argue that localised precarity underscores the need for a more nuanced approach to analysing power relations between state–platform–creator–audience actors within the local context and beyond global platform architectures. In this sense, with its focus on localised precarity rather than abstracting YouTubing from local contexts of media regulation, production, distribution, and reception, this research contributes to Western notions of creator precarity, which are largely used to analyse economic and technological uncertainties arising from the organisation of creator labour within the platform architectures and the wider SME industries (Duffy et al., 2021).

Theorising localised precarity starts with acknowledging the nation-state as an important local actor in platformed content creation, as in other forms of media production, through its law-making capacity that governs production practices and shapes the political economy of media (Bulut, 2022). This allows for a complicating of the locus of creator precarity, as well as platform precarity, because platforms 'are subject to the whims of the state', leading to 'unintended consequences for platform labourers' (Steinberg et al., 2024: 5). The existential threats to platforms posed by the states (i.e. platform bans), for instance, are not only signs of platform nationalism but also of precarity for creators who depend on those platforms for income (Craig et al., 2021). Furthermore, enforcing national content regulations for platforms, whose policies tend to overlook local sensitivities and values that are vital to media production and reception, emerges as another source of localised precarity (Nieborg and Poell, 2018). In addition to

nation-states' persistent intention to regulate platforms and cultural production, creator labour is also governed by audiences who are culturally and politically situated subjects. This becomes especially evident in the practices of creators who produce content in non-mainstream languages and thereby depend on local audiences. This not only makes language a factor in precarity that limits global reach (Ganti, 2016) but also highlights the significance of understanding how creators' adapt their content strategies to the cultural politics of the society in which their audiences are located (Mehta, 2020). Accordingly, this approach to localised precarity provides a broader framework, drawing attention to the complexity of the relationship between platforms, creator labour, and local contexts, which influence the stability of creators' already unstable work.

Method

The article presents findings from a larger research project that examined creator labour in Turkey and employed mixed methods, such as interviews with creators to capture their own realities in their working lives, observations in PHs to trace the dynamics of production cultures, and the walkthrough method to identify platform affordances and regulatory frameworks. While the observational study provided insights into the processes of media production and co-creator relations, and the walkthrough method helped me to put subjective interpretations of creators into the context of the platform affordances and regulatory frameworks, and to consider how these factors shape or constrain creator labour, the findings presented in this article are primarily based on the interview data which captures creators' localised precarity experiences.

I conducted in-depth interviews with nine Turkish creators between December 2019 and June 2020. The interviews were conducted in-person (N: 6) until the research was interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, and online (N: 3) after the introduction public health measures in mid-March 2020. I designed the interviews as semi-structured, which better utilises 'the knowledge producing potentials of dialogues' and allows the research subject to become visible 'as a knowledge-producing participant' during the interviews (Brinkmann, 2018: 579). The interviews, lasting between 40 minutes and 2 hours, covered multiple dimensions, including creators' motivations for YouTubing; career objectives and concerns; skills used in the processes of media production, distribution and promotion; relations with co-creators, audiences, brands and MCNs; and localised experiences as YouTube creators in Turkey. The recruitment of research subjects was based on voluntary participation. Following the institutional ethical review process (Reference number: SRESC-2019-2376320), all subjects were fully informed about the processes of data collection, usage, storage, anonymisation and disposal, and signed a consent form. I gave a pseudonym to each participant and PH due to ethical considerations.

The research participants, identified through snowball sampling, were active creators, generating a liveable full-time income from YouTubing. They were diverse, consisting of independent creators who are self-professionalised, those who engage in paid employment in PHs as part of a production team and have recognisable job titles as media workers, as well as managers/founders of such PHs. This diversity is also evident in their channels' subscriber range, content genres and the size of the PHs for which they

create content (see Tables 1A and 1B in the Appendix). Given this diversity, they all experience precarity, especially concerning the ways the platform mediates their labour practices and geographic specificities shaping their creative media practices.

After completing the data collection, I first engaged in open coding to decontextualise data by breaking it into simpler categories and then practised focused coding to recontextualise the data by tracing thematic similarities among previously identified categories (Saldaña, 2013). One major theme, which emerged in the nexus of precarity and economic, political, linguistic, and sociocultural factors, formed the basis of this article, facilitating the conceptualisation of localised precarity grounded in the experiences of Turkish creators.

Localisation of precarious YouTubing in Turkey

The article presents three main findings that demonstrate how creator precarity comes from geographic specificities shaped by various economic, political, cultural, and linguistic factors of the national context of creation. While these issues, demonstrating unique challenges faced by Turkish creators in navigating a landscape of uncertainties, emerged organically in my discussion with the research participants, the impact of technological factors (i.e. access to the internet, technical equipment, and digital tools) remained unmarked in their narratives. The reason for this might be that all participants were based in Istanbul, where there is digital infrastructure for high-speed internet, and the majority of them were working in the context of a PH, where they can access technical equipment and digital tools. Therefore, the findings address Turkish creators' experiences of localised precarity related economic instability, political climate, linguistic barriers, and cultural expectations.

First, by examining the relationship between advertising and the state of the economy, the research demonstrates that the unstable nature of the Turkish economy affects local ad rates on YouTube and the availability of external sponsorship deals. This ultimately increases the income-related insecurity of creators and their need to find alternative income sources. Second, restrictive internet regulations of the country, which continue to include the possibility of a YouTube ban, and of YouTube broadcasting being overseen by a national regulatory body, contribute to the Turkish creators' precarity as they shape their concerns about the future of their careers and their content decisions. Third, Turkish creators, who rely on local audiences due to language constraints, practise self-censorship to avoid touching upon the sociocultural, political, and religious sensitivities of Turkish society. This, on the one hand, restricts creators' relative autonomy in digital media production, and, on the other, increases the value of their content and helps creators to manage the risk of potential audience flight and fragmentation.

YouTubing in an unstable and developing economy

YouTube's business model relies on providing brands with an opportunity to display their ads to the platform's users when and where these ads have relevance, and sharing its advertising revenue with its creators. Accordingly, how much creators receive depends on how much advertisers pay to YouTube for 1000 impressions, which is calculated by a metric, namely Cost Per Mille (CPM). Creators and PHs, who are eligible to join the YPP, experience income fluctuation because of the changes in CPM rates, and thereby economic

precarity, due to the lack of fixed pay rates. This business model is nonetheless inherently tied to geography, among other factors, like season, ad type, and content genre, because CPM rates differ depending on viewers' location, where competition levels in the local advertising markets vary (YouTube, n.d.). This makes it 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, as it is evident that the richer the country is, the more advertising spending it has (Doyle, 2002). Accordingly, CPM rates differ between rich and poor countries as the former tend to have more competition in the ad market due to a larger pool of potential advertisers, leading to higher CPM rates. The platform, instead of adapting the calculation of CPMs to differences across less lucrative advertising markets, normalises these fluctuations by suggesting that creators adjust their creative choices and upload schedules (YouTube, 2018). As a result, creators who receive the majority of views from low CPM countries, with less developed economies, experience localised precarity compared to creators who appeal to audiences in more profitable markets, despite the fact that the model itself is global.

Considering that Turkish creators largely receive their video views from Turkey due to the language barrier that limits their global reach, a closer look at Turkey's ad market becomes essential. The share of digital advertising investments in the Turkish ad market is lower than TV's share (Reklamcilar Dernegi, 2020) and it is also less developed compared to other countries such as the UK and Germany, because digital ad spend per capita in Turkey is among the lowest in the European market (IAB Europe, 2020). This makes the YouTube CPM much lower in the country, creating localised precarity for Turkish creators. While describing the challenges stemming from YouTubing in Turkey, it was evident that creators also shared assumptions about devaluation of their local advertising market that generate lower CPM rates. Independent creator Elif 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 … because in the US 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 three 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 developed markets, therefore, contributes to localised precarity. This also has a strong relation with the platformisation of financial precarity, as it underscores the absence of a minimum rate of return for creator labour.

Lower CPMs in Turkey make for a more challenging environment for creators and PHs to generate a sustainable income because they, like all creators worldwide, also experience algorithmic precarity, linked to algorithmic (in)visibility, which decreases AdSense revenue (Duffy, 2020). As argued elsewhere (Bidav and Mehta, 2024), this further increases the need to engage in non-scalable ways of generating income (i.e. external brand deals) and multi-platform labour. Independent creator Mert mentioned his disgruntlement regarding this necessity:

> You can earn more money by doing the same thing, putting in the same effort [abroad].… 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.

Echoing Mert's statement, Can, manager of PH-1, highlighted how YouTubing in Turkey also impacts their views on platformed creator labour:

> I think it makes more sense to see YouTube, at least in markets like Turkey, as a platform for (self-)promotion rather than a money-making medium.

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

Additionally, the amount of digital advertising by brands, as well as external sponsorship deals, is very much dependent on the Turkish economy, because companies might reduce their advertising budgets if there is an economic crisis. The integration of the Turkish economy into the global financial system in 1980s has trapped its economy in an ongoing currency crisis due to its reliance on short-term foreign capital movements (Boratav and Yeldan, 2006). This unstable and crisis-prone economic structure has been maintained by the neoliberal policies of the AKP (Yeldan and Unuvar, 2015) and may affect the availability of external sponsorship deals, as brands tend to cut their ad budget during economic downturns. Within this economic context, the relation between ad spending and economic crisis was also confirmed by at least one of the research participants. Ugur, founder 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.

Precarious YouTubing is, thus, localised, given the unstable and developing nature of the Turkish economy, which affects not only the YouTube CPM rates but also the availability of external brand deals.

YouTubing in a restrictive internet governance regime

Nation-states' intention to exercise control over digital platforms and the ways in which platforms respond to local politics emerges as another factor contributing to localised precarity, as the relations between these actors eventually shape digital working cultures (Punathambekar and Mohan, 2019). Hence, the disparities between different regional or nation-state-based internet regulations must be considered in order to understand localised precarity of creators. For instance, member states of the European Union (EU) are subject to EU-wide rules under the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, which aims

not only to regulate digital platforms but also to prevent over-regulation, or unfair regulation, of these service providers through limiting regulatory power at national level (Carolan and O'Neill, 2019). 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 regulations shaped by the cultural politics of the state (Yesil, 2016). In parallel with this, restrictive internet regulation policies of the AKP – which enacted the Internet Law in 2007 and 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 the Gezi uprising in 2013 and the failed coup attempt in 2016 – contribute to Turkish creators' localised precarity through systems of direct control (Yesil et al., 2017).

The national Internet Law has always manifested itself in practice, restricting freedom of expression and censoring media, as in the case of multiple instances of blocking access to YouTube for various reasons, including terrorist propaganda, defamation of Atatürk, obscenity, and insulting Turkishness (Bozdag, 2016). While this demonstrates that YouTube is not solely governed by economic practices but also political practices that, in turn, depend on national and historical contexts, this localised 'corporate precarity' faced by the platform itself has broader consequences for other actors like creators and PHs in the SME industries, as all rely on the platform for income generation (Steinberg et al., 2024). For instance, one of the previous YouTube bans in Turkey, imposed between 27 March and 29 May 2014 due to a video which was regarded as revealing state secrets and posing a threat to the national security of the country (Bozdag, 2016), directly interrupted PH-1's operations immediately after its launch. Despite starting its operation as an MCN, PH-1 started to produce content for its own channels after a while. This interruption, coupled with the scarcity of brands that would advertise on YouTube, and low number of creators in Turkey at that time, made Can's business hard to run as he explained:

> In the first place, YouTube was closed when we started.… When sending weekly update e-mails [to our partners abroad], I was writing 'Our prime-minister banned YouTube again, we're waiting'.… In 2014, there was also no brand to advertise on YouTube.… It started properly after 2015–16.… Apart from that, there were not many YouTubers to cross-promote.

Furthermore, the possibility of another YouTube ban emerges as one of the concerns of Turkish creators about the future of their work. For example, this is how Alp, content editor at PH-1, ties his concerns about the future of his work to the Turkish political context:

> 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.… For example, there was a problem with Google's services like Gmail and YouTube this morning.… In that situation, the first thing that comes to your mind is that the government has probably cut off access, and you will be unemployed in two or three months. You always have such a concern.

YouTubing in this context, therefore, creates localised precarity as it fosters financial precarity and job insecurity for both individual creators and those working in PHs.

In addition to blocking access to the platform, the possibility of regulating YouTube broadcasting by RTÜK – which was more recently authorised to regulate digital streaming services like Netflix in 2019 and has always been a politicised censorship body – is another concern which affects content decisions, such as making alcohol-free content. In relation to this, Turkish creators try to produce not only advertiser-friendly content to prevent shadowbanning or demonetisation on YouTube, similar to creators in other contexts, but also culturally and politically acceptable content to avoid potential demonetisation, future tax obligations, or administrative fines that might stem from RTÜK regulations. The manager of PH-1, Can, for instance, mentioned: 'I would also do content containing alcohol. I think it would be very nice.' When I asked him whether he cannot or does not produce this type of content, 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.

Though alcohol-related content that does not promote irresponsible drinking can be monetised on YouTube, according to the platform's guidelines, Turkish creators may engage in self-censorship, as producing alcohol-free content works better for YouTube Turkey in case the government widens the regulatory scope of RTÜK.

This overall media governance context of Turkey also determines what is sayable and unsayable and, more importantly, broadcasting the unsayable may result in arrest. For instance, in December 2021, three Turkish YouTubers were put under house arrest with an international travel ban merely for conducting street interviews with random people about their economic concerns amid the ongoing financial crisis in the country (Bianet, 2021). The AKP's restrictive internet regulations can therefore be seen as part of a larger ideology of state suppression of social media users, which might result in self-censoring practices (Yalkin et al., 2014). Independent creator Mert, for example, explained why he forbears from sharing anything political:

> 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 creators might also practise self-censorship similar to Chinese creators due to the state's presence in regulation of media (Craig et al., 2021). However, self-censoring is also rooted in socioculturally situated creator–audience relations, which are scrutinised in the following section.

YouTubing within culturally and politically acceptable boundaries

In addition to nation-states' persistent intention to regulate media, YouTubing is also governed by engagement with audiences. Within the SME industries, creators who appeal to regional or local audiences due to language face greater precarity as they are

dependent on local audiences (Mehta, 2020). In their practices, as argued elsewhere (Bidav and Mehta, 2024), language emerges as a barrier that limits broader visibility and success, creating linguistic precarity, despite the platform's affordance of global distribution of content. As Turkish creators produce content in Turkish, their YouTube audience is fragmented because of language from the start. Moreover, given that the Turkish TV industry producing transnational content still depends on local audiences for success (Algan and Kaptan, 2023), YouTube creators who have no access to professional tools or services for translation and/or dubbing experience more dependency on local audiences. To avoid further fragmentation, they try to make content that might have mass appeal to secure a large number of views and thereby secure their income. This makes them more attentive to sociocultural, religious, and political sensitivities of their audiences to maintain their audience base (Bagdogan, 2023). It is therefore important to examine culturally and politically situated audience–creator relations so as to understand localised precarity.

In Turkey, some major dimensions of polarisation centre on secularity; religiousness; homosexuality; social intolerance of ethnic and religious minorities such as Kurds, Alevis, and refugees, and the rights of these groups; and terrorism (Carkoglu and Toprak, 2007). Since social and political polarisation centred on these issues also leads to polarisation in the media, and thereby audience fragmentation, producing SME content without touching upon them emerges as a strategy of Turkish creators who want to entertain their audiences within culturally and politically acceptable boundaries. For instance, referring to the red, green, and yellow colours of the Kurdish flag, which represents the Kurdish political movement, Can, manager of PH-1, raised his concern related to the Kurdish issue:

> 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. 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 five steps beyond and coming back from there, at least I am.

Since the Kurdish question – the long-lasting debate over the political, cultural, and linguistic rights of the Kurdish population living in Turkey – is a major geopolitical issue in Turkey, he envisages the possible circulation of inaccurate ways of representing him and PH-1 on social media and is attentive to such issues. Similarly, Alp, content editor in PH-1, gave another example concerning their sensitivity to religious matters:

> Alevis have sensitivities, Sunnis have sensitivities, alcohol is haram.… I am not a religious person, but we are afraid that we will touch a sensitivity of a religious group. If something like that were to happen, God forbid, your career would probably be over.

Their dependency on local audiences also exacerbates their career concerns, which leads to creators adapting their content to cater to the specific sensibilities of their audience. This underscores the need to understand creator precarity beyond economic insecurities stemming from the organisation of labour within the platform architectures.

Such concerns, however, do not apply only to PHs due to their corporate-like nature and are shared by individual creators as well. For example, considering that the members of the LGBTI community are among those facing marginalisation in Turkey, making LGBTI-relatable content, which has always been a sensitive issue in the Turkish mediascape due to RTÜK regulations, potentially results in attracting hateful reactions and a fragmentation of audience. Independent creator Mert's account exemplifies how he pays attention to and tackles this issue:

> I will make a movie recommendation video.… I cannot suggest 5 or 10 LGBTI movies. Would I recommend [these movies]? Yes. There is no problem for me. Would they lynch [me]? Let them. Would they say he recommended gay movies to children? Let them say [it]. Yet, in order not to draw reaction, I do this: If I am going to recommend ten films, I select two [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 sociocultural and political sensitivities of audiences to prevent audience flight and avoid digital culture of social lynching. Failure to do so might therefore create both financial and emotional insecurity.

In some cases, creators might imagine their audiences as like-minded, but that does not prevent them from practising self-censorship, as can be seen in the paradoxical account of Ilgin, production coordinator in PH-3:

> 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 videos 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.' Similarly, during my observation in PH-1, the manager, Can, was monitoring language used by participants involved in video production and suggesting edits for post-production. In this sense, despite maintaining freedom of expression during filming, 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 (self-)censorship, Baris, 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 practise 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 easily be assumed that creators have relative freedom regarding media production on digital platforms in comparison to traditional broadcasting. What Baris

describes, however, highlights that their practices actually resemble television broadcasting within the political and cultural contexts of Turkey. Creators, therefore, do not practise self-censorship solely because of the state's presence in YouTube governance. Self-censoring as a distinct survival strategy also rooted in the cultural context, wherein creators manage audience expectations to maintain cultural relevance and support, reflecting the norms of broadcast television.

Conclusion

Creator precarity has been widely examined in the context of platform affordances and regulatory frameworks, and the wider SME industries. This type of inquiry, developed largely in Western contexts, reveals how an observable power asymmetry between the platform, which governs labour practices via top-down policies and ever changing non-human actors like algorithms, and creators, who compete for audience attention and visibility in the competitive social media ecosystem, leads to economic and algorithmic precarities. However, Western notions of creator precarity tend to ignore various local factors that impact platformed creator labour, as their focus is largely on economic and technological aspects of YouTubing, and therefore carry the risk of erasing diverse localised experiences of creators.

My research on YouTubing in Turkey foregrounds the necessity of considering local contexts when attempting to understand creator labour mediated by a global platform, instead of framing it as a space-neutral activity. This is because the findings reveal that Turkish creators face unique challenges related to economic instability, political climate, linguistic barriers, and cultural expectations in their local context. Accordingly, the article identifies additional sources of precarity by examining how YouTube's monetisation tools depend on the state of the advertising industry in national economies, how YouTubing is mediated not only by the platform's regulations but also broader local internet governance regimes, and how creators' content decisions change when they connect with the idea of audiences whose media consumption is shaped by their sociocultural, religious, and political sensitivities. These findings, therefore, necessitate acknowledging other factors in precarity that come from creators' local production contexts and are overlooked in Western literature.

Focusing on the interconnected web of economic, political, cultural, and linguistic factors through the lens of localised precarity provides a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges involved in YouTubing, highlighting the complex relationship between creator labour, platform, and local context. The conceptualisation of localised precarity offered in this article provides a new lens for understanding creator precarity without falling into the trap of economic reductionism and platform determinism. Rather, it foregrounds the analytical value of considering creator labour within a network of actors whose relations are situated in local production contexts and platform architectures. However, platform–state relations are not only visible in authoritarian contexts and the absence of narratives about political, cultural, and linguistic factors in Western literature does not mean there is an absence of an impact of these factors on creator labour. While the ecological perspective adopted in this research has revealed various challenges faced by Turkish creators stemming from their local production cultures, the conceptualisation of localised precarity might also illuminate other YouTubing cultures.

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Author biography

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Appendix

Table 1A: Interview participants.

S. No.	Respondent (pseudonym)	Gender	Age range	Position	Content genre	Subscriber range
1	Can	Male	33–35	Manager in PH-1	Entertainment	3M–6M
2	Alp	Male	36–38	Content editor in PH-1	Entertainment	3M–6M
3	Yigit	Male	30–32	Director in PH-1; Production manager in PH-2	Entertainment	3M–6M
4	Ugur	Male	24–26	Creator in PH-2; Founder of PH-2	Entertainment	3M–6M
5	Deniz	Female	24–26	Creator in PH-2	Entertainment	1M–3M
6	Ilgin	Female	21–23	Production manager in PH-3	Film and TV	100K–500K
7	Baris	Male	30–32	Video head in PH-4; Former creator in PH-1	Entertainment	3M–6M
8	Mert	Male	24–26	Independent creator	Fandom	100K–500K
9	Elif	Female	24–26	Independent creator	Beauty and lifestyle	25K–100K

Table 1B: Production houses.

Company (pseudonym)	Founder	Number of employees	Number of YouTube channels	Subscriber range
PH-1	Media entrepreneur	11–50	5	3M–6M
PH-2	Creator	2–10	3	3M–6M
PH-3	Media entrepreneur	11–50	1	100K–500K
PH-4	Media entrepreneur	51–200	2	3M–6M