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Enchanted sensemaking among content creators

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ABSTRACT

The content creator industry is growing and evolving, with creators assuming increasingly prominent roles in society through the generation and circulation of content that impacts audiences' online and offline lives. This expansion is occurring regardless of the precarious and uncertain nature of content creation. Against this backdrop, this study explores creators' sensemaking approaches and their characteristics. In this paper we focus on two aspects of creators' sensemaking: the non-rational and non-utilitarian sources of understanding that we term enchanted sensemaking. Our conceptualization incorporates three theoretical perspectives on enchantment: Weber's (2004) (dis)enchantment of modernity, Gell's (1994) enchantment of technology, and Huizinga's (1943) enchantment of play to examine creator cultures. It considers previous research exploring aspects of enchantment towards digital and algorithmic media. Through 30 semi-structured interviews in two countries (Spain and Switzerland), complemented by a visual elicitation method, this paper contributes to the field of creator studies by: (1) conceptualizing creators' enchanted sensemaking and its types; (2) identifying the instances and modes of enchanted sensemaking and (3) illustrating how these sensemaking approaches influence content creation decisions and impact overall ecosystem dynamics.

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Content creators; influencers; sensemaking; social media; ecosystem; enchantment

Introduction

I feel like whenever I do content creation, I really, I forget about everything, I really enjoy it. (...) So it's not something that I do because I have to do it, I do it when I feel good. (Cassandra, expat Influencer)

The past two decades have been a period of expansion and a time of change across social media platforms, their functions, formats, and logics. In this period, content creation and influencing have become huge industries of great relevance in various societal domains, becoming more desirable occupations, regardless of their precarity. In this context, researchers in the field of creator and influencer studies have identified some key tensions that shape content creation: commerciality versus authenticity (Arriagada & Bishop,

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2021); professionalization versus amateurism (Abidin, 2017); privacy versus publicness (Zhao, 2021). Our project examines the underlying sensemaking mechanisms among content creators and explores the types of enchantment in content creation practices and decisions.

Through our analysis, we propose the concept of enchanted sensemaking as a framework for understanding how content creators make sense of their relationships within social media ecosystems. We draw on sensemaking to examine the uncertain nature of content creation and the challenges creators face as they navigate shifting conditions. Defined as ‘the process through which people work to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectations’ (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 1), it offers a fitting lens for examining how creators interpret and respond to the instabilities of platform life. Our threefold theoretical approach to enchantment draws from Weber’s (2004) diagnosis of the disenchantment of modern society, Gell’s (1994) enchantment of technology, and Huizinga’s (1943) enchantment of play. Enchanted sensemaking involves content creators relying on non-rational (e.g., mystical, mythical, intuitive, magical approaches) and non-utilitarian (e.g., passion, intrinsic motivation, play) sources to understand different aspects of their content creation activities. Enchanted sensemaking is subjective, it occurs across various content creation activities and operates within the boundaries established by creators around their online presence. The conceptualization of enchanted sensemaking offers researchers a lens for analyzing how content creators understand and navigate their activities, considering the deeper psychological and cultural factors driving creators’ underlying motivations and coping strategies within uncertain and evolving social media ecosystems.

Our paper proceeds as follows: we outline the theoretical framework informing our proposal of enchanted sensemaking, followed by a review of previous research that has explored different sensemaking approaches among content creators. Next, we describe our methods, followed by our findings and discussion, where we identify four types of enchanted sensemaking in content creation activities: intuition, self-transcendence, deification, and play. We also outline two dimensions that characterize enchanted sensemaking: (1) instances of enchantment (moments of content creation where enchanted sensemaking happens: self-reflexive, relational, creative and coping) and (2) modes of enchantment (characteristics of enchanted sensemaking: liminal, mythical, temporal and embodied). We conclude with implications of this research, specifically the role of enchantment in obscuring problematic structural issues in the creator economy.

Theoretical framework

In his 1917 Science as a Vocation lecture, Weber (2004) made two arguments that are relevant for creator studies: (1) that the disenchantment of the world by way of scientific rationalization displaces magical/supernatural explanations, which are important to find meaning and answers for the most fundamental questions humanity faces; (2) that science as an occupation involves vocational aspects (less utilitarian, driven by an inner calling) but the disenchantment of modernity calls for increased institutionalization (more utilitarian, rational, and requiring external validation). Alfred Gell examined the enchantment of technology by considering the creation and consumption of art as complex technical processes that have the power of ‘casting a spell over us so that we

see the real world in an enchanted form.’ (1994, p. 44). Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* considers the bounded spaces of play he called ‘magic circles’ where time and space are suspended to give rise to rules and performances that only apply within these spaces with an ‘enchancing’ effect for participants (1943, p. 10).

Weber (2004), Gell (1994) and Huizinga (1943) propose perspectives on enchantment that are in direct dialogue with key discussions in creator research. In relation to Weber’s (2004) disenchantment of the world, including the consideration of vocation as enchantment, creator research examines the tension between vocation/profession (Duffy, 2017), with a critical approach that favors a disenchanted perspective of content creation as a profession rather than a vocation. This is a key perspective among critical creator scholars aiming to ascribe rights to creators and problematize structural inequalities in content creation as work (Glatt, 2023; Karhawi & Grohmann, 2024; Poell et al., 2022). In this field, passion/vocation in content creation is considered a limitation that idealizes unpaid labor (Duffy, 2017). In relation to the enchantment of technologies (Gell, 1994), the magical/mystical nature of Silicon Valley ideologies and discourse (Aupers, 2009; Nagy & Neff, 2024) and the sacralization of technology and the self in the context of digitalization and AI (Latzer, 2026) have been examined as forms of (re-)enchantment. Meanwhile, content creation has been explored as a creative occupation, belonging to the creative industries and creative economy (Kolo, 2024; Poell et al., 2022), in turn, creative processes can be examined as enchanting for creators and for audiences. Considering Huizinga’s (1943) enchantment of play, his conceptualization of the ‘magic circle’ of play as a suspended and bounded space–time construct serves as an analytical lens to understand the boundedness of content creators’ social media ecosystems (Jaramillo-Dent & Latzer, 2026), where specific rules and norms are developed between the ecosystem actors involved (e.g., creators, audiences, brands) that only apply in these spaces and in some cases do not align with rational sensemaking.

The non-rational/non-utilitarian foundations of our enchantment conceptualization carry assumptions that require reflection. The empiricism/rationalism debate in philosophy has long contested what counts as valid knowledge, questioning the boundaries between sensory experience and reason as its sources (Murphy, 2010). Similarly, the prioritization of scientific rationality as the sole mode of valid knowledge has been critiqued for excluding diverse ways of apprehending the world – each with their own internal coherences and validities, often situated in particular standpoints (Haraway, 1988). Platform companies promote enchantment through magical language that has been conceptualized as *conjuration of algorithms* to avoid criticism (Nagy & Neff, 2024). Similarly, the utilitarian/non-utilitarian distinction has itself been problematized in relation to platform work. Passion is harnessed as immaterial value production (Jarrett, 2022), and affective investment is precisely what aspirational labor critique reveals as structurally exploitable (Duffy, 2017). We acknowledge these limitations but, for the purposes of our conceptualization, treat enchantment as non-rational and non-utilitarian because we find it analytically generative within the field’s broader debates and tensions.

The present work does not attempt to counter or minimize existing arguments of the importance of ascribing rights to content creators as workers or ignore the power relationships that exist between platforms and powerless creators. We take an agentic perspective on digital labor (Jarrett, 2022), by foregrounding enchantment as an additional dimension to explain why creators continue their activities even in the face of uncertainty, harm, and de-monetization.

State of research

Our argument draws on an interdisciplinary body of research on enchantment, spanning fields such as Communication, Anthropology, and Sociology. Our framework centers on non-rational and non-utilitarian dimensions of enchanted sensemaking, which have been explored in scholarship on both human–computer interaction and content creator cultures.

In relation to mystical forms of non-rational sensemaking, the examination of algorithmic conspирituality among so-called ‘if you see this’ content creators on TikTok, found that they ascribed divine intervention, personalized engagement and intuitive spontaneity in the generation of this genre of content (De et al., 2025, p. 16). Whereas TikTok users have been found to engage in reflexive ambivalence (mystical and logical sensemaking) when faced with content that is especially well-tailored in their FYP (Cotter et al., 2024). De et al. (2025) also examine creators being considered as Gods or prophets. We build on this research beyond algorithmic sensemaking on TikTok, to examine the instances where content creators across different platforms and genres interpret the actors/elements of their ecosystem through *enchanted sensemaking*.

Enchanted sensemaking can fit both non-rational and non-utilitarian sensemaking approaches. This is the case of self-transcendent media experiences, which are characterized by a sense of interconnectedness, altruism, care, and spirituality (Oliver et al., 2018). The meaningful nature of content creation has been examined as a specific form of influence called sinnfluence (meaning influence) to describe influencers whose content promotes values and social change (Rutarux, 2023). We examine the role of self-transcendence (Oliver et al., 2018) and higher meaning (e.g., altruism, societal impact, care) in making sense of the decision to start or continue creating content online.

The enchantment of technologies has long been tied to Silicon Valley ideologies underpinning the design and expansion of the very platforms on which creators operate (Aupers, 2009). These ideologies bring together distinct currents of thought that inform our conceptualization of enchanted sensemaking. Alexandre’s (2025) examination of tech as religion resonates with our notions of self-transcendence among creators (e.g., as expressed in Silicon Valley’s effective altruism appeals) and deification (e.g., in relation to Silicon Valley’s techno-messianic and transhumanist ideologies). His analysis critically unpacks the techno-solutionist undercurrents that justify technological advancement through appeals to an expansive, humanity-serving purpose, one that naturalizes unregulated growth as a moral imperative. Our work examines how such forms of enchantment surface among actors operating within platforms, particularly creators and their communities, whose enchantment both reflects and complicates these top-down ideological currents.

The relationship between enchantment and play has been examined in human–computer interaction research to understand the affective attachments people establish with technologies and the sense of wonder technologies promote in their users (Bennett, 2001; McCarthy et al., 2006). Enchantment has been described as a state of ‘temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement’ (Bennett, 2001, p. 5). The suspended nature of enchantment is applicable to both human–computer interaction and creative processes. Researchers on human–computer interaction have described enchantment as the experience of being carried away by technologies not fully understood, prompting

curiosity and interest (McCarthy et al., 2006). In relation to content creators, the impossibility to understand some aspects of platforms has been examined as a deliberate mechanism of control by platforms that promote uncertainty among creators through ever-changing monetization and visibility conditions (Poell et al., 2022). Playful enchantment can also be understood through the lens of aspirational labor among content creators who are driven by their passion for their online activities and the potential of future success (Duffy, 2017).

Play has also been explored as an agentic strategy to make visible serious content. Playful activism aims to conceal the seriousness of certain content through *play* involving imitation and alignment with platform vernaculars (Cervi & Divon, 2023). As argued by these authors, creators abide by specific platform vernaculars, generating a linguistic and vernacular dimension of Huizinga's magic circle (1943) through a common, multi-modal language, enabled by platform affordances that respond to serious issues through ludic storytelling (Cervi & Divon, 2023). The present work expands on this theorization by examining playfulness as one form of non-utilitarian *enchantment* in the day-to-day activities of content creators, characterized by leisurely motivations for content creation and the consideration of play and joy as part of content creation decisions. In this context, the magic circle resembles the conceptualization of content creators' social media ecosystem as a 'bounded yet networked (connected to other ecosystems), multisided market of sociotechnical structures (e.g. actors, elements, and systems) that enable and constrain certain behaviors, relationships, and dependencies between them through their design and/or regulation.' (Jaramillo-Dent & Latzer, 2026, p. 3).

We argue that there are other dimensions of this playfulness that enable wonder-related enchantment within creators' self-perceived ecosystems, which function as *ecological magic circles*. Huizinga's 'magic circle' helps understand the allure generated by content creators and their communities at various levels who are attempting to make sense of existing norms and generating community-based standards of behavior. The internal logics of creators' micro-communities establish a bounded space where the conventions of ordinary life are suspended and replaced by the dynamics of 'play' within the community (Huizinga, 1943). We build on the spaces of suspension, wonder and irrationality conceptualized by Huizinga to examine the playful nature of *enchanted sense-making* among content creators.

Methods

This study takes a qualitative, ecological approach using semi-structured interviews and a visual elicitation method to understand: (RQ1) how creators make sense of their content creation activities, aspects and actors and to examine (RQ2) the characteristics of creators' sensemaking approaches to understand content creation.

Procedure

We carried out 30 semi-structured interviews in-person or using a video conferencing platform to accommodate participants' preferences and availability. The interviews were carried out between May 2024 and July 2025. We combined the interviews with a visual mapping elicitation method (Bahn & Weatherill, 2012) based on digital

cartography and cognitive mapping, that enabled participants to visually locate their perceived ecosystem actors based on a comprehensive map of creators' social media ecosystem (Jaramillo-Dent & Latzer, 2026). In this paper we focus on creators' enchanted sensemaking and consider the role of their ecosystem in the generation of these forms of knowledge but will not report on the complete results of the visual elicitation approach. A separate publication will examine these results in detail.

Data collection

The inclusion criteria included having 5000 or more followers on Instagram or TikTok, creating/uploading content periodically, having a following that derived from their online content creation, and having the goal of reaching a larger audience. We excluded creators who self-identified as religious or spiritual as part of their creator persona and within their content as our focus was on enchanted sensemaking among mainstream creators rather than explicitly faith/spirituality-based creators. We considered that including such creators would have confounded everyday forms of enchantment with institutionalized religious/spiritual belief systems.

Once we identified creators who fit the inclusion/exclusion criteria, we followed recruiting methods that are established in the field of creator studies. This involved contacting creators directly through private-messaging and emails and asking for recommendations for additional participants (snowball) (Duffy & Meisner, 2023). Participants were invited to a study to assess their experiences and beliefs about different aspects of their content creation activities.

Participating creators received an incentive of 100 CHF in Switzerland and 100 EUR in Spain. The payment amount compensated participants for both their time and expenses involved in taking part. The compensation reflected several factors: the interview duration (lasting up to 120 min), the challenge of accessing creators for research purposes, the fact that most content creators work independently (restricting their availability for unpaid work), and the goal of recruiting creators with varying audience sizes. This payment level aligns with standard rates used by Swiss research firms conducting similar qualitative studies. The incentive was disclosed in both recruitment documents and the consent form, with participants being made aware that receiving payment did not compromise the voluntary nature of their involvement, consistent with established research practices (Masoumi, 2024). We contacted a total of 342 creators in both countries and interviewed a total of 30 content creators: (n = 15) in Switzerland and (n = 15) in Spain across the range of creator typologies. Interviews were carried out in Swiss German (n = 4), English (n = 11), and Spanish (n = 15) by native speakers in each language. Participants signed consent forms which follow the requirements of the University of Zurich Ethics Committee, informing them of the nature of the study, consent to record, the uses and storage of their data, and pseudonymization of their quotes. We discussed the consent forms with them before beginning each interview in case they had any questions or concerns.

The national contexts were chosen for comparative purposes and access. Both countries feature differing regulations and contrasting labor markets, with Spain featuring a stricter regulatory context (Gonzalez, 2024) and more precarious labor market, and Switzerland featuring no influencer-specific regulations, but requirements to align with

existing advertising regulations (Beranek, 2025). Switzerland also features a privileged labor market compared to Spain. The results revealed subtle differences between the countries, mentioned in the findings where relevant.

Participating creators were informed of the study goal and gave written informed consent to voluntarily participate, including consenting to analysis of their pseudonymized data for publication. The study did not require further ethics approval because it did not meet conditions for additional review according to policies established by the University of Zurich Ethics Committee. This means that the study did not involve sensitive data, participants did not belong to vulnerable groups, and there was no potential for harm or disadvantage. The study complies with research ethics principles in humanities and social sciences, particularly regarding privacy, confidential handling of data, and minimizing risk to participants. Table 1 presents an overview of the creators interviewed and their main characteristics.

Table 1. Information about participants.

COUNTRY	PSEUDONYM	CONTENT GENRE	#FOLLOWERS ACROSS PLATFORMS	PLATFORMS USED	AGE	GENDER
SPAIN	José	Comedy	41144000	IG, TKTK, YT	24	M
	Néstor	Mental health / self-help books	21697900	IG, TKTK, YT	30	M
	Ricardo	News	2894500	IG, TKTK, YT	38	M
	Marco	Beauty	359440	IG, TKTK, YT	29	M
	Arturo	Medicine, Nutrition	293700	IG, TKTK	34	M
	Claudio	Vegan cooking	174500	IG, TKTK, YT	26	M
	Mercedes	Lifestyle	166760	IG, TKTK, YT	24	F
	Alexander	Reproductive health	139683	IG, TKTK, YT	35	M
	Julia	Music and Celebrities	117400	IG, TKTK, YT	31	F
	Yvette	Financial planning	112062	IG, TKTK	39	F
	Viviana	Travel	78500	IG, TKTK	47	F
	Mariana	Fashion, lifestyle	67750	IG, TKTK, YT	31	F
	Lina	History: focus on vikings	44462	IG, TKTK	38	F
	Elena	Travel: Diving and photography	28000	IG, TKTK	35	F
SWITZERLAND	Adrian	Makeup/beauty	25158	IG, TKTK, YT	36	M
	Anna	Digital Products	436000	IG, TKTK, YT	21	F
	Lucas	Travel	136200	IG, TKTK, YT	31	M
	Octavia	Lifestyle and expat life	131600	IG, TKTK, YT	32	F
	Samuel	Comedy	127559	IG, TKTK, YT	36	M
	Magdalena	Photography/lifestyle	102100	IG, LDN	58	F
	Marcus	Comedy	94250	IG, TKTK, YT	38	M
	Jasmine	Teaching	61742	IG, TKTK, YT	29	F
	Rebecca	Travel and food	41509	IG, TKTK, YT	32	F
	Cassandra	Information for expats	41073	IG, TKTK	26	F
	Frederik	Politics	36342	IG, TKTK, YT	28	M
	Axel	Music/Lifestyle	24358	IG, TKTK, YT	22	M
	Jane	Food and lifestyle	22123	IG, TKTK	28	F
	Mackenzie	Lifestyle	17569	IG, TKTK, YT	23	F
	Lauren	Business/entrepreneurship	16200	IG, LDN	35	F
Rachel	Music/podcast producer	8584	IG	32	F	

The questionnaire included 7 blocks of questions related to: (1) demographic information, (2) content creation trajectory and self-perception; (3) visual elicitation activity to map the relevant actors of participant's preferred-platform ecosystem; beliefs, behaviors, and experiences related to: (4) platforms; (5) audiences; (6) communities of creators; (7) additional actors/phenomena that emerged as significant to the specific creator. For each block 4–7, the initial questions were open to different sensemaking approaches, and the final questions touched on unexplainable and uncertain aspects of content creation.

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed, aided by two AI tools: Notta for in-person interviews and Zoom's built-in transcription software for virtual interviews. Each AI-generated transcript was reviewed and corrected by a native speaker of the original language, and only the quotes used were translated into English when needed.

The interviews were analyzed using a hybrid approach (deductive and inductive) reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interviews were mainly coded by the first author and the final themes were refined reflexively, in iterative coding rounds, and in conversations with the second author. As data was collected, it was processed and a first round of analysis was carried out, which involved open coding, followed by iterative analysis rounds considering the conceptual consistency between the data and the proposed codes/themes. As enchanted sensemaking themes emerged, the main coder engaged with additional literature to locate theoretical explanations of emerging aspects such as *intuition* or *states of flow* across disciplines.

The responses related to enchanted sensemaking dimensions emerged in two ways: (1) organically, in response to general questions about creators' perceptions of diverse aspects of content creation; and (2) in response to specific questions about the unexplainable and uncertain nature of some aspects of content creation. These responses were analyzed as enchanted when the participants perceived them that way (e.g., some unexplainable elements may be explainable in practice but if the participant considered them unexplainable, they were analyzed as such). The non-utilitarian aspects of enchanted sensemaking emerged inductively from the data, but they emerged as a relevant component of creators' enchantment. Interviews lasted between 60 and 120 min.

Findings and discussion

In this section we outline our main findings. In response to RQ1, we find that creators make sense of content creation activities and actors through rational (disenchanted, evidence-based) and non-rational (enchanted, mystical and mythical) approaches. Alongside non-rational sensemaking approaches, non-utilitarian sensemaking emerged as an important aspect of enchantment from the data, shaping our definition of *enchanted sensemaking* as creators' reliance on non-rational and non-utilitarian sources to understand different aspects of their content creation activities.

Figure 1 responds to RQ2, summarizing the findings of our project. It illustrates and defines four types of *enchanted sensemaking* among creators: deification, intuition, self-transcendence and play. *Enchanted sensemaking* can be understood through four

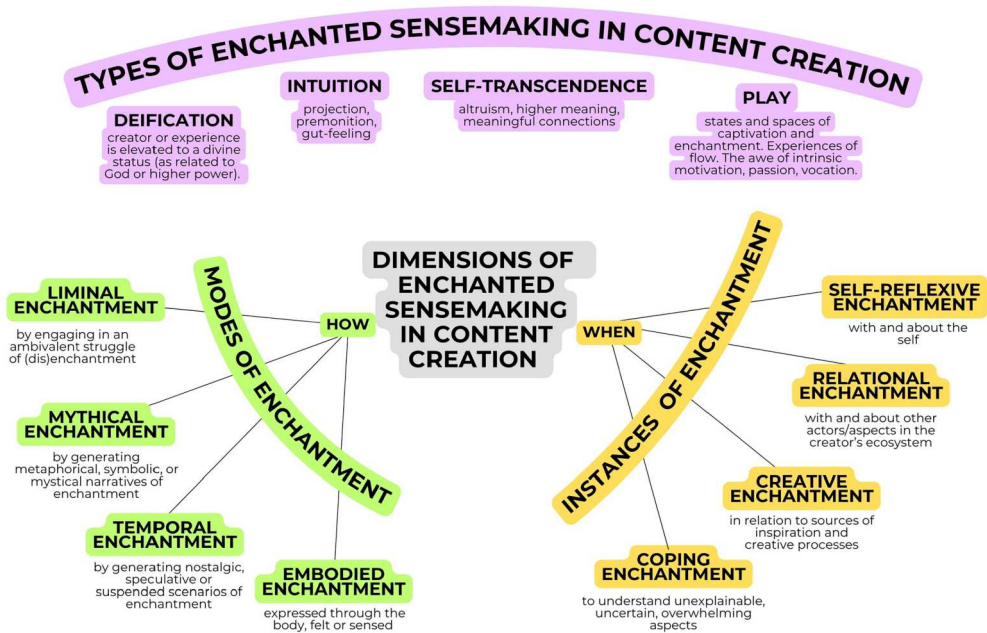


Figure 1. Types and dimensions of enchanted sensemaking in content creation. Created by the Authors.

instances of enchantment (the moments of content creation that reflect enchanted sensemaking: self-reflexive, relational, creative and coping) and four modes of enchantment (the characteristics of enchanted sensemaking: liminal, mythical, temporal and embodied). These dimensions (instances and modes of enchantment) provide a more granular characterization of enchanted sensemaking among content creators.

In the next sections, we report on the results organized by the four *types of enchantment* identified in the data, exemplifying the other two dimensions of enchantment (modes, and instances) cross-sectionally within each of the four types of enchantment. For the purposes of our theorization, content creation events or moments refer to specific occurrences within a creator's practice that lend themselves to enchantment — such as viral moments, unexpected growth, or unsolicited opportunities. Within our framework, content creation events are conceptualized as instances of content creation (see Figure 1).

Deification

Deification is defined as 'the process of transformation from the natural into the supernatural' (Kurian, 2011, p. 1). In the context of content creators, deification refers to a sensemaking approach that ascribes divine characteristics to content creation actors, technologies or events, resonating with the techno-spiritual feedback loop of sacralizing technology and the self within theorizations of a rising techno-religion (Latzer, 2026).

Within Silicon Valley ideologies underlying social media platforms, techno-messianism (Alexandre, 2025) emerges as a deified version of techno-optimism that naturalizes

the idea of technology as transformative and quasi-divine, whereas in our findings, this enchanted logic extends to people (e.g., creator deification) or events (e.g., content creation events as signs from a deity or a higher power), some of which include interactions with technology (Figure 2).

The cases of Julia and Axel reflect the deification of content creation events as divine. Julia deifies her creative processes/inspiration, and Axel deifies serendipitous events as signs to continue his creative activities. Axel's example illustrates the role of traditional religion as a source of sensemaking when seemingly serendipitous events take place, where he ascribes events that are beneficial to his continuation of content creation activities to God and prayer. Julia reflects a slightly different case where she perceives these inspiration instances as signs from an unknown higher being or God.

José describes his own deification experience when his followers reacted to meeting him in person in ways that appeared extreme, as if he was a God. This experience was unsettling for him because it was a realization of the impact he has on people offline and the need to counter this deification by establishing his similarity to them through assurances of being 'just a person' or 'just like' his audience members. José's desire to counter his audience's reaction towards him as superior or special also responds to notions of authenticity in creator research, which has been theorized as a way to downplay their privileged position (Duffy, 2017). His response also reflects his realization of his own responsibility, in this case with children and youth. Creators' experiences of being idolized as Gods or prophets has been explored among algorithmic conspirituality content creators (who create content that suggests a divine algorithmic force connecting them to users) and found that the responsibility creators feel was similar to that of care workers (De et al., 2025).

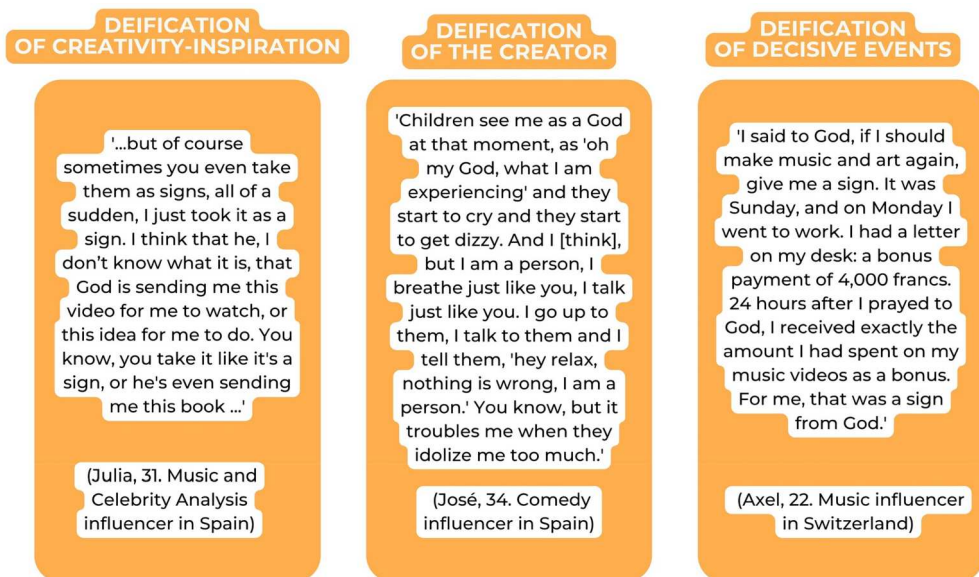


Figure 2. Quotes by creators illustrating different instances of deification. Created by the Authors.

Intuitive enchantment

Intuition is defined as the immediate, non-analytical understanding or knowledge that arises without conscious reasoning or deliberate thought processes (Zander et al., 2016). It represents the mind's ability to grasp insights, solutions, or truths through sensory-cognitive approaches drawing from lived experiences (Pedwell, 2023), often manifesting as sudden clarity or knowing that feels certain despite lacking explicit evidence or step-by-step reasoning. Figure 3 reflects creators' reported instances of intuition.

In relation to our broader theoretical framework (Figure 1), Magdalena's example illustrates two modes of enchanted sensemaking: embodied and mythical. It also reflects a self-reflexive instance of enchantment.

Magdalena describes how she initiated her content creation by following her intuition, which emerged embodied, as a gut-feeling. Her metaphorical explanation of social media as warm water that is pleasant exemplifies an instance of self-reflection that prompts the mythical nature of her sensemaking approach to understand her unexpected success as an influencer and an explanation that reflects an enchanted sensemaking process (e.g., her intuition). Her approach to content creation follows an embodied understanding that guides her behavior to 'just try it out'. She describes her disbelief in the face of unexpected success that did not derive from a rational strategy of growth but was guided by intuition.

This example illustrates the impact of creators' enchanted sensemaking on a specific ecosystem. Magdalena's enchanted interpretation of her own success generates immaterial value for her (e.g., it motivates her to continue because she receives more than monetary gain) but it materially benefits the platform (e.g., through her continued generation of content). This illustrates the paradoxical nature of intuitive enchantment. Magdalena's understanding of content creation emerges as intuitive/embodied and enjoyable (like

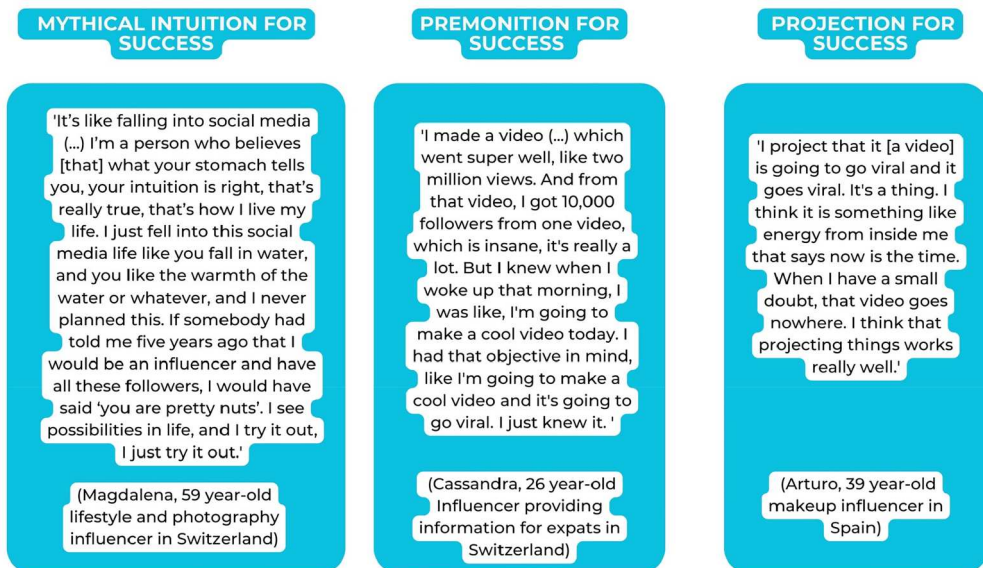


Figure 3. Intuitive enchantment. Created by the Authors.

warm water), reflecting the non-utilitarian and non-rational meaning making that characterizes enchantment. Magdalena's enchanted motivations mix material and immaterial valorization of her labor in line with Jarrett's (2022) argument on digital labor. Magdalena's case also reflects the potential of algorithmic systems within platforms to extract affective data and quantify it both at the level of immaterial labor (Jarrett, 2022) and at the level of affective interactions with algorithmic systems (Pedwell, 2023). If creators have intuition-based beliefs guiding their decisions to start or continue creating content, rather than considerations of content creation as work, for instance, it is possible to argue that creators are more likely to continue generating content regardless of monetization possibilities or changing conditions by platforms. Thus, intuitive enchantment becomes a site where affective and embodied knowledge is simultaneously a resource for creators' self-understanding, a driver to start/continue creating content, and a raw material for algorithmic extraction and datafication.

Christine's and Arturo's examples illustrate temporal modes of enchantment. Christine provided an overview of her experience of 'knowing' that she would create a special video one morning, leading to an instance of virality. Arturo explains his practice of *projecting virality*, an example of enchanted sensemaking to make sense of an often-unexplainable aspect of content creation, the potential for virality. Their descriptions reflect future-oriented approaches to virality aligned with magical thinking that is common among entrepreneurs (Ganzin et al., 2020) and promoted through industry leaders' discourse (Nagy & Neff, 2024). Arturo's explanation provides an additional dimension of sensemaking and strategic projection to achieve virality, in contrast logical processes of experimentation reported by creators in previous research (Duffy & Meisner, 2023). Both cases align with theorizations of intuition as a central cognitive aspect of creative processes (Raami, 2015) and one that has been ascribed to the realm of the supernatural and paranormal.

Gender becomes relevant in the examination of intuition. Among our participants, both men and women reported *enchanted sensemaking* but there were marked gender and cultural differences: in Switzerland most people who reported different forms of enchanted sensemaking were women and in Spain people across both genders reported magical and enchanted sensemaking. This partly supports previous research that examines the gendered nature of platform labor and its relationship with immaterial forms of labor (Jarrett, 2022) in this case exemplified by enchanted forms of sensemaking.

Self-transcendent enchantment

Drawing on Oliver et al.'s (2018, p. 386) conceptualization of self-transcendent media experiences as encompassing universalism, connectedness, moral virtue, altruism, and spirituality, we examine how creators experience self-transcendent enchantment. While this dimension has not been directly explored from creators' perspectives, it surfaces indirectly in research on algorithmic conspirituality (De et al., 2025). It also connects to Weber's (2004) disenchantment thesis, in which vocation and passion sustain meaning and values – conditions equally applicable to creators. The centrality of altruism and interconnectedness in content creation further resonates with Jarrett's (2022) argument that immaterial aspects of the self can become assetizable within digital labor, and with analyses of Silicon Valley ideologies that intertwine technological advancement with

self-transformation, framing effective altruism as a vehicle for personal and collective progress (Alexandre, 2025). In this sense, creators' self-transcendent enchantment can itself be understood as a form of technological advancement: by internalizing the value of content creation and its broader benefits, creators become willing participants in platform growth. We find that this enchantment reflects a desire for meaning beyond monetization, and functions in many cases as the primary motivation to keep creating – particularly among creators who have not yet monetized or who face shifting monetization and visibility conditions.

Examining the self-perceived mission of content creators proved insightful, because it revealed that regardless of the relative triviality of their content, most creators expressed some form of societal impact and higher meaning resulting from their content creation activities. Previous categorizations of content creators have distinguished between mainstream influencers who behave as commercial actors aimed at monetizing their content and so-called *sinnfluencers* (meaning influencers) who aim to promote values and some form of higher meaning through positive societal impact (Rutarux, 2023). Our sample included no self-described activist content creators, and it was interesting to find that almost all the creators identified a way in which their content had a broader impact on society, which we interpret through the lens of self-transcendent enchantment in line with theorizations of self-transcendent media experiences (Oliver et al., 2018) (Figure 4).

These higher meanings reflect *self-transcendent enchanted sensemaking*, where creators: (1) generate higher meanings in their activities; and (2) perceive themselves as having special forms of niche expertise and authority across different life domains of their followers regardless of the nature of their content. Previous explorations of influencers' decisions to continue investing their time in social media for their career have identified rational reasons, such as career growth, but also meaning-based motivations such as improving people's lives or having an impact in the world (Kubler, 2023). In terms of

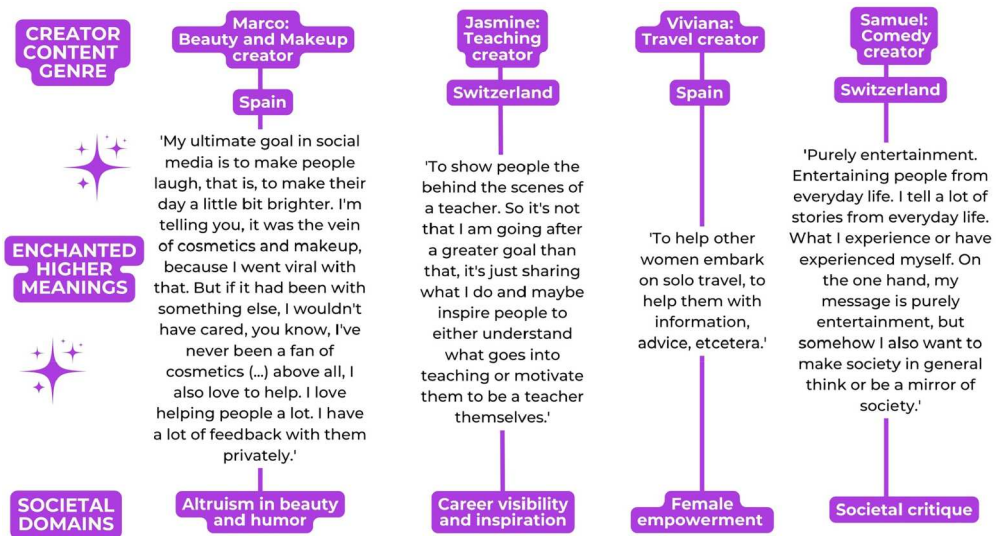


Figure 4. Enchanted purposes and motivations of their content. Created by the Authors.

the modes and instances of enchantment, self-transcendent sensemaking often occurs liminally (shifting between enchantment and disenchantment) in moments of self-reflexivity. Self-reflexivity enables creators to evaluate their role in the social media ecosystem and the aspects of themselves that they want to convey as part of their authentic selves (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021). Figure 5 reflects the liminal and self-reflective nature of self-transcendent, *enchanted sensemaking* through the example of Adrián.

Adrián creates content to help others, not to increase his follower count, sharing his personal experiences alongside makeup/beauty advice. His *self-transcendent enchantment* is characterized by: (1) the idea that his altruistic actions are rewarded through universal justice systems evidenced by his connection with his followers; (2) the conviction that focusing on metrics would undermine the deeper meaning and moral value that drive him.

In Adrián's case his state of *enchanted sensemaking* is also relational, as it involves offering his emotional labor to receive support for his own emotional needs. This exchange drives his desire to continue creating content. We can argue that as long as he experiences this feedback loop with his audience, metrics-based popularity becomes a complementary benefit to his content creation activities. This has been partly explored as the authenticity/commerciality tension in influencer imaginaries, in which creators see their intrinsic values (in this case his altruistic content creation) as challenged by notions of success tied to commerciality (in this case a focus on metrics) (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021). This also resembles what Jarrett (2022) defined as the assetization of the digital worker, which simultaneously responds to neoliberal logics and personal interests.

Playful enchantment: flow, vocation, and joy in creator cultures

The awe, wonder, and joy that characterize the enchantment of play (Huizinga, 1943) also illustrate the non-utilitarian nature of *enchanted sensemaking*. In this context,

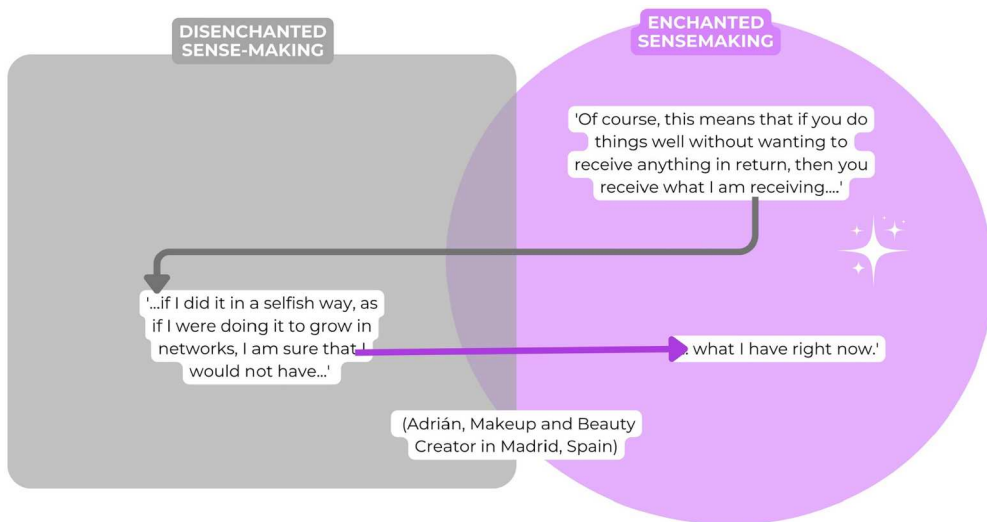


Figure 5. Liminality of (dis)enchantment between metrics-related and altruistic motivations for content creation. Created by the Authors.

Maslow's concept of *peak experiences* (1962) is useful to understand *playful enchantment*. Maslow describes *peak experiences* as 'mystic experiences, moments of great awe, moments of the most intense happiness or even rapture, ecstasy or bliss (...). These moments were of pure, positive happiness (...) [when] they felt one with the world' (1962, p. 9). *Flow* has been identified as an experience or state that enables creativity among artists, combining concentration, an altered sense of time, effortless in creation, and a feeling of wonder that has been described as magical or divine (Chemi, 2016).

Peak experiences and states of *flow* are closely related to vocation and intrinsic motivation. These phenomena have been studied among high performers across diverse fields, exploring how these states of 'enlightenment' relate to exceptional performance in business management, sports, science, and creative professions such as music (Harung, 2012). Content creators, while operating across various disciplinary domains through their expertise and content genres, share a common desire to generate and circulate content beyond their immediate social circles. Some creators meet the criteria for high performance, suggesting that peak experiences may contribute significantly to their transition from aspiring to established creators. Thus, the creative and inspirational nature of content creation invites further exploration of peak experiences, vocation, or flow. Particularly considering the intrinsic motivations that sustain creators' commitment despite financial precarity, focusing instead on meaning-based satisfaction.

In our data, we find the case of Julia as illustrative of states of flow (Figure 6) and creative vocation (Figure 7) that drive her desire to continue creating content. Her example illustrates what we term *playful enchantment* in creativity characterized by self-reflection, relationality and liminality.

Julia and Cassandra illustrate Gell's (1994) argument that creative processes can induce a spellbound state in people prompting them to examine the world through a lens of enchantment. Their *playful enchantment* also reflects the space of suspension offered by Huizinga's (1943) magic circle, where the outer world is forgotten, in this case while they engage in content creation or ideations of content.



Figure 6. States of flow during creative processes. Created by the Authors.

It is interesting to examine the case of Julia. She has spent the last five years generating content with the hope of *making it* in the influencer industry. Figure 7 illustrates Julia's liminal process, shifting in and out of *enchanted sensemaking*. She describes her struggles with the decision to get a 'real job' or to continue to pursue content creation as a career. Certain assumptions are attached to her state of *enchanted sensemaking*: (1) content creation as an outlet for creativity; (2) creativity as a 'bright light' that is validated by a member of her ecosystem (a YouTuber); (3) content creation as a calling that responds to a basic instinct to express oneself; (4) creativity as natural and necessary; (5) creativity as something that should not be 'turned off'. In this case the evidence that she draws from reflects an enchanted perspective of human creativity, supported by ecosystem actors and a final critique of people who disallow creativity within themselves.

This liminal reflection can also be interpreted through the lens of Jarrett's (2022) examination of digital labor, where she argues that creativity and meaning are highly sought aspects of work, only reserved for creative elites. In this case we see how Julia justifies the precarity of content creation as a profession that is creative and meaningful and illuminates how some creators decide to continue to generate content regardless of this precarity, by favoring their state of *enchanted sensemaking*.

When shifting to disenchanting sensemaking, Julia relies on utilitarian, institutionalized and capitalistic assumptions related to the need to get a stable job: (1) jobs in companies are stable; (2) her personal creative project is neither profitable nor feasible; (3) she needs to have a reliable income. In this case, she steps out of her state of *enchanted sensemaking* for evidence that she should follow a different route, based on trusted advice (her mother) and general assumptions about being an adult in modern society (e.g., income as a measure of success). This reflects her attempt at separating mainstream

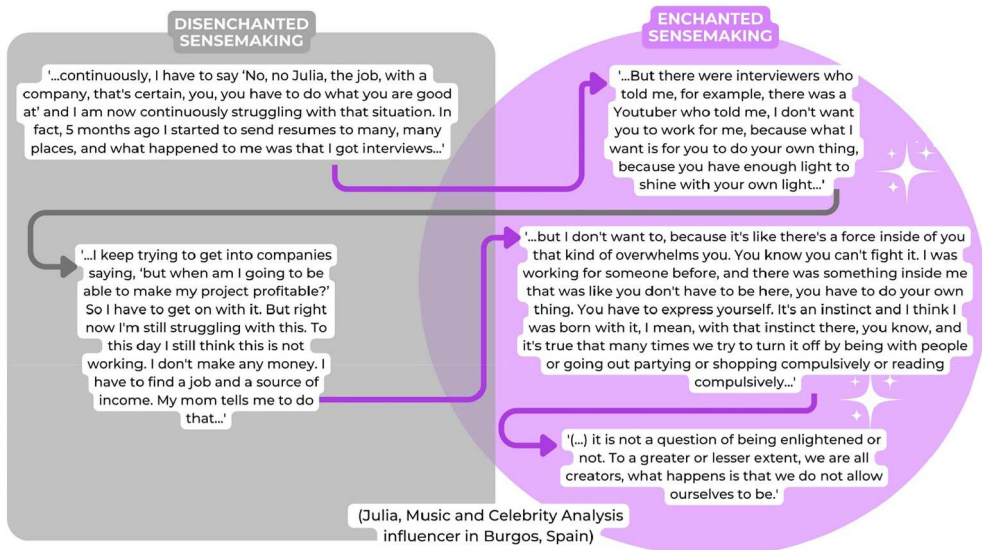


Figure 7. Liminality of (dis)enchantment between content creation and a traditional career. This reflects one long quote that illustrates a string of thought. Created by the Authors.

from creative jobs (Jarrett, 2022) she deploys an agentic attempt at taking control of her professional future.

This liminal self-reflection also aligns with Weber's (2004) argument of disenchantment as attached to institutionalization and professionalization. The disenchantment of modern societies, argues Weber (2004), considers resilience as key in maintaining one's mental health while navigating uncertain labor markets, but enchantment and vocation may explain how some creators decide to continue regardless of the conditions. Julia's paradoxical thinking also reflects how playful enchantment develops within specific cultural spaces of sensemaking, which adapt Huizinga's (1943) 'magic circles' to argue that: (1) people establish separate spatial/temporal dimensions ('magic circles') within their social media ecosystems (Jaramillo-Dent & Latzer, 2026), which determine the limits between the enchanted and the ordinary world, allowing for special rules, temporalities, and order to develop; and (2) the notion of play as an enchanted aspect of social life that goes beyond utilitarian goals, driven by *fun* and defying logical interpretation.

Creator industries have been argued as 'winner takes all' contexts where very few will be highly successful (Poell et al., 2022). These arguments have been present in the creative industries for a long time, the idea that creative careers are 'less than' and the potential to succeed is so low that it requires time, resistance and sacrifice. This should be added to Julia's contextual reality of Spain, where it is socially acceptable and financially necessary to rely on parents until an older age than in other countries, and young adults have the opportunity to take longer to decide on their final professional pathway (Esteve & Conde Ruiz, 2025). The precarious labor market in Spain means that content creation is as feasible or precarious as other entrepreneurial occupations, rather than especially precarious or risky (Esteve & Conde Ruiz, 2025).

Julia's example illustrates the liminality – or in-betweenness— of creator cultures (Zhao, 2021), which is present as an important mode of enchanted sensemaking. Previous studies have identified some *liminal* aspects of creator cultures: (1) professionalism/amateurism (Abidin, 2017; Zhao, 2021); (2) authenticity/performativity (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021; Zhao, 2021); and (3) privacy/publicness (Zhao, 2021); hypervisibility vs. invisibility (Jaramillo-Dent, 2022); aspirations vs. reality (Duffy, 2017). It is possible to argue that the uncertainty that characterizes content creation (Glatt, 2023; Poell et al., 2022) also generates liminal spaces of sensemaking where creators need to rethink their strategies. Our examination of liminality supports findings among users making sense of the TikTok algorithm, reflecting the reflexive ambivalence between 'mystical possibilities and logical skepticism' when interpreting algorithmic recommendations on this platform (Cotter et al., 2024, p. 1895). Within our theorization, this liminality enables enchanted sensemaking in the algorithmic spaces generated by social media platforms, constructed through the relationships and norms generated between creators and different actors of the ecosystem, which follow the logics of social media platforms and in some cases challenge rationality (Jaramillo-Dent & Latzer, 2026).

Conclusions

This study examines a previously underexplored dimension of content creator behavior by conceptualizing and empirically assessing *enchanted sensemaking* within the digital

creative economy. Through our analysis we demonstrate that content creators routinely engage in non-rational and non-utilitarian forms of understanding that fundamentally shape their creative processes, platform relationships, and career trajectories.

Our findings reveal that *enchanted sensemaking* is not merely a peripheral aspect of content creation but rather a central mechanism through which creators navigate the uncertainties and complexities of digital platforms. The four types of *enchanted sensemaking* identified —intuition, self-transcendence, deification, and play— offer distinct pathways for creators to make sense of algorithmic systems, audience relationships, and their own creative identities. These findings align with a growing body of research examining the immaterial, embodied, and affective labors of creators (Abidin, 2017; Duffy, 2017; Glatt, 2023; Jarrett, 2022), but it challenges rationalist assumptions about creator behavior to suggest that purely instrumental approaches to understanding the creator economy are insufficient.

The dimensional framework we propose —encompassing instances (self-reflexive, relational, creative, and coping) and modes (liminal, mythical, temporal, and embodied) of enchantment —provides a nuanced lens for analyzing how creators experience and respond to platform dynamics. This framework reveals how *enchanted sensemaking* serves both adaptive and potentially maladaptive functions, enabling creators to maintain agency and meaning while sometimes obscuring structural inequalities and platform exploitation. This contributes to growing scholarly interest in the affective and experiential dimensions of digital labor in line with key digital labor theorists (Jarrett, 2022), complementing economic and technological analyses of the creator economy.

For regulators and policymakers, our findings suggest that supporting creator well-being requires understanding not only economic precarity but also the emotional and spiritual dimensions of creative work. Platform designers and initiatives aiming at supporting creators may benefit from acknowledging and accommodating enchanted components of creator labor.

In terms of future research, our findings related to gender and cultural differences in terms of who is more likely to rely on *enchanted sensemaking* requires more research to assess the prevalence among intersectional communities, to understand the role of enchanted sensemaking among creators of marginalized identities, whose vulnerabilities have been found to be perpetuated by platforms and algorithmic systems (Duffy & Meisner, 2023). Although we identified some types of enchanted sensemaking among creators, it would be interesting to expand on these, for instance considering psychological or cultural traits that connect with specific sensemaking approaches in other geographic regions.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Daniela Jaramillo-Dent:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Michael Latzer:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Resources, Writing – review & editing.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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