



Behind the Screens in South Africa: Challenges, Opportunities, and Needs of Digital Content Creators

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Executive Summary

Digital content creators have become increasingly influential actors within contemporary information ecosystems. Across social media platforms, creators inform, entertain, mobilize and shape public discourse for growing audiences. As creators continue to emerge as key intermediaries between information and the public, understanding their motivations, practices, competencies, and challenges has become essential for strengthening the resilience of the digital information ecosystems.

As part of its mandate to promote Media and Information Literacy (MIL) and freedom of expression, UNESCO has been building a global evidence based on digital content creators through its “Behind the Screens” research. In the framework of UNESCO’s “Social Media 4 Peace” (SM4P) project funded by the European Union, this global methodology has been adapted and localized to examine South Africa’s creators’ ecosystem and identify context-specific opportunities and challenges to engage with content creators in addressing harmful online content.

The study explored what motivates digital content creators in South Africa, how they navigate MIL in practice, their engagement with Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI), their exposure and resilience to hate speech, discrimination and Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV), as well as their perspectives on ethics, accountability, self-regulation, platform governance, and capacity-building needs.

The research was conducted by the Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change (CABC) using a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data was collected through a nationwide survey from 48 respondents and in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 11 content creators.

The findings show that digital creators operate in a rapidly evolving ecosystem where ethical practice is widely valued but often self-defined and inconsistently applied. While creators express a strong desire to educate, inspire and contribute positively to public discourse, they simultaneously navigate significant commercial, technological, and ethical pressures.

The study identifies significant gaps between creators' growing public influence and the support available to help them fulfil this role ethically. Only 10.4% of respondents had participated in MIL trainings, nearly two-thirds (64.6%) reported little or no awareness of international standards on freedom of expression, and 59% were unaware of laws and regulations specifically relevant to digital content creation in South Africa.



An important disconnect also emerged between creators' confidence in their own MIL competencies and their everyday information practices. Although respondents generally expressed high confidence in their ability to identify misinformation and assess credibility of information, 36% reported that they do not consistently verify information before sharing it, while 34% rely on engagement metrics, such as likes and views, as indicators of credibility.

Generative AI is becoming an integral part of content creation, supporting tasks ranging from research and drafting to editing. Many creators expressed concerns that transparency around their AI use may undermine perceptions of authenticity or audience trust, with only one-third (33%) of creators consistently disclosing their use of AI to their audiences.

The study further shows that creators overwhelmingly recognise both their ethical responsibilities and the influence they have over audiences. They view ethical decision-making primarily in terms of personal integrity, audience trust, and individual responsibility rather than as compliance with formal professional standards or institutional accountability mechanisms. At the same time, creators consistently described the significant influence of external factors—including recommendation algorithms, content moderation systems, commercial partnerships, and monetisation pressures—which act as powerful de facto editorial forces shaping content production. These findings indicate that ethical content creation cannot be understood solely as an individual responsibility but must also be considered within the broader platform and governance environments in which creators operate.

Survey findings also point to significant exposure to harmful online content, highlighting the online-offline continuum of harm and the need for stronger protection and response mechanisms. Three-quarters (75%) of respondents reported having experienced or witnessed Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence, while 43% had personally experienced identity-based hate speech or harassment.

In the South African context, xenophobia emerges as a particularly pronounced and recurring form of online harm with 72% of creators reporting having experienced or witnessed it online. This trend is closely linked to broader patterns of migration-related tension, inequality, and historical social divisions. It is not only a background feature of online interaction but actively shapes creator experiences, mirroring and amplifying broader offline patterns of xenophobia and social exclusion within South African society.

Interviews further highlighted the emotional labour associated with maintaining an online presence, managing public scrutiny, responding to harmful interactions, and coping with constant pressure to remain visible and relevant. Despite these challenges, many creators reported limited confidence in existing reporting and support mechanisms.

Despite the lack of formal guidance, creators expressed a strong appetite for capacity-building: 87.5% believe that some sort of ethical guidelines would be valuable, while 87% expressed interest in training on ethics and freedom of expression.



1. Research Background and Methodology

1.1 Research Objectives

This report reflects the findings of research conducted in South Africa based on a methodological framework developed for UNESCO's global study on digital content creators, "Behind the screens: insights from digital content creators; understanding their intentions, practices and challenges," which was adapted and localized to capture the specific dynamics, practices, and challenges of creators in the South African context.

The study forms part of UNESCO's broader efforts to address knowledge gaps regarding digital content creators and their crucial role in producing, sharing, and shaping information that reaches wide and diverse audiences. Conducted with the support of the EU-funded "Social Media 4 Peace" (SM4P) project, the research applied a comprehensive approach to contribute to building evidence and knowledge about the landscape of digital content creation in South Africa. Thereby, the research explored the motivations of creators, their MIL competencies and practices, such as in verifying or sourcing information, their ways of engagement with the Generative AI (GAI), their levels of exposure and resilience to hate speech, discrimination, and Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV), as well as their perspectives on self-regulation, ethics, and capacity-building needs.

1.2 Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative data from a survey conducted with creators across South Africa with in-depth qualitative interviews.

- **The survey** was responded by 48 South African creators. Respondents were over 18 years of age, engaged in regular content creation for audiences wider than friends and family with at least 1000

followers. The respondents came from multiple provinces across South Africa: Gauteng (20), KwaZulu-Natal (10), Western Cape (4), Limpopo (3), North West (2), Mpumalanga (1), and Eastern Cape (1). At the same time, four (4) respondents did not specify the province while two (2) South African creators reported their location to be outside of the country.

- **In-depth qualitative interviews (n=11):** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 creators engaged in multiple content genres using various platforms. These interviews explored ethical dilemmas, variations in experiences using different platforms, perceptions of accountability, AI usage, emotions labour connected to content creation and support needs.

The sample of creators included in this study comprised creators producing content in English. We acknowledge that this represents a limitation in the South African context, where 11 official languages—isiZulu, isiXhosa, Afrikaans, English, Sepedi (Northern Sotho), Setswana, Sesotho, Xitsonga, siSwati, Tshivenda, and isiNdebele—reflect a highly multilingual society, and where an increasing number of digital content creators produce content in multiple local languages rather than exclusively in English.

As the study did not systematically capture or analyse the linguistic diversity of creators' outputs, the findings may not fully reflect the practices and experiences of creators producing content in indigenous languages or the ways in which language shapes audience engagement and information dissemination across South Africa's diverse digital ecosystem. Future research could build on these findings by explicitly examining multilingual content creation and the role of local languages, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of South Africa's evolving creator landscape.

2. Study Findings

2.1 Motivations for Digital Content Creation: From Expression to Monetization

More than one-third of respondents (37.5%) indicated that their primary motivation for creating content is either to ‘Share knowledge with others’ (20.8%) or to ‘Express opinions and emotions on subjects of interest’ (16.7%). This highlights the important role that digital content creators play in facilitating public discourse and contributing to diverse online conversations.

At the same time, economic and professional considerations are also important drivers of content creation: 20.8% identified “Making money” as their primary motivation, while a further 16.7% reported being motivated by opportunities to “Promote their work/careers”.

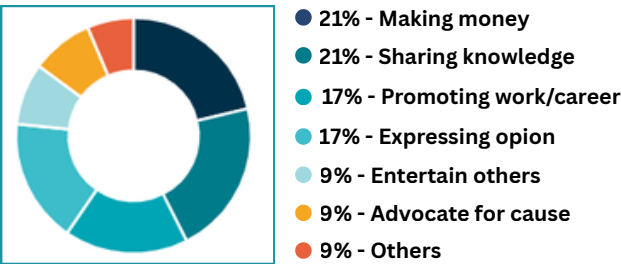


“The idea is to become a thought leader.”

“I want to inspire people...use the platform for good things.”

However, although not being motivated mainly by generating income, 75% of creators either already earn income from content creation or aspire to do so; 20.8% earn money from content creation as a primary source of income; 16.7% as a secondary; while 29.2% indicated that they would like to monetize their content but do not know how to do so, and a further 8.3% reported having attempted to monetize their content unsuccessfully.

Figure 1. Primary motivation for content creation



2.2 Skills and Content Creation Practices

2.2.1 Specialized Education and Training

Half of respondents (50%) reported that they do not have any journalism training or background. A further 22.9% reported some professional experience working in journalism (e.g., reporters or editors), while 10.4% indicated having participated in some form of journalism training.

A small proportion of respondents (10.4%) reported having participated in Media and Information Literacy (MIL) training, pointing to the fact that the majority of creators operate without formal preparation for content creation.

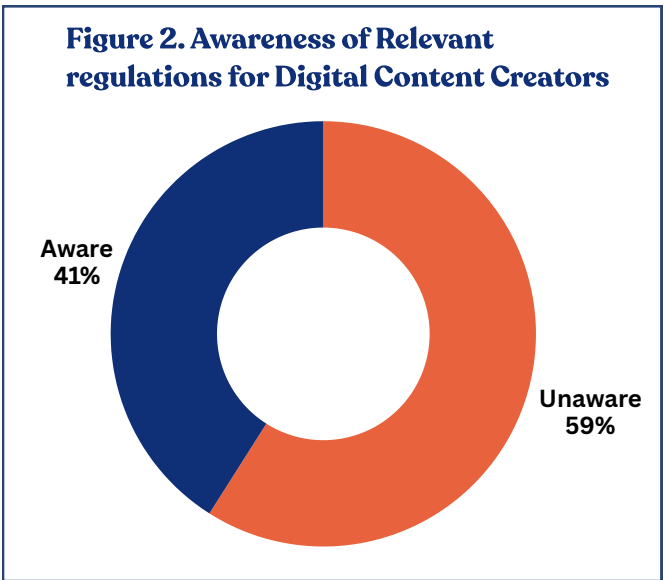
2.2.2 Knowledge of legal frameworks: rights and obligations

Findings indicate a mixed and uneven level of awareness among South African digital content creators regarding international standards on freedom of expression and applicable national regulatory frameworks.

While South Africa currently has no legislation that specifically and exclusively regulates digital content creators as a distinct category, a patchwork of existing laws does apply to their activities. These include the Cybercrimes Act (2020), the Films and Publications Amendment Act (2019), the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), the Consumer Protection Act, and common law provisions on defamation and copyright. The Advertising Regulatory Board (ARB) Code also governs sponsored and influencer content.

When asked about the international standards for freedom of expression as enshrined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 19), nearly two-thirds of respondents (64.6%) indicated limited or no awareness of it: 27.1% reported that they had merely heard about it without any familiarity with its content, while 37.5% reported never having heard of it.

In contrast, 71% of respondents indicated some awareness of relevant South African legal frameworks, such as those related to freedom of expression, copyright, or defamation. At the same time, 59% of respondents reported being unaware of regulations specifically relevant to digital content creation.

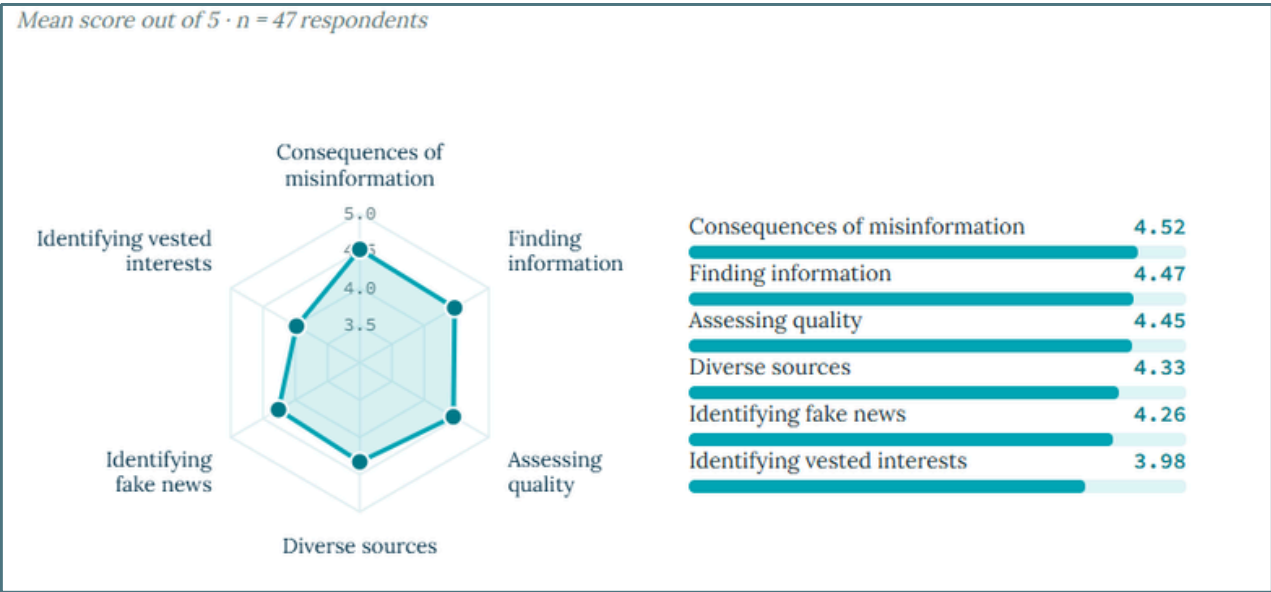


Taken together, the findings suggest that while many creators have some awareness of national legal frameworks, there remains a substantial gap in understanding both international standards and the specific regulatory obligations that apply to digital content production and distribution – a gap that could carry real legal risk.

2.2.3 Self-perception of MIL competencies vs. real practices in content creation

When asked to self-assess their abilities across a range of competencies such as understanding the consequences of misinformation, identifying disinformation, assessing the credibility of information, and identifying vested interests in information sources, average scores ranged from 3.98 to 4.52 on a five-point scale. Furthermore, survey data shows that 56% of respondents believe that they actively promote critical thinking among their followers, and many describe their content as a vehicle for social good rather than mere entertainment.

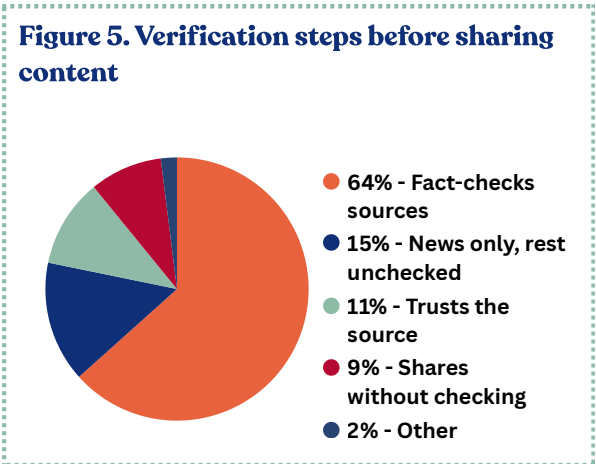
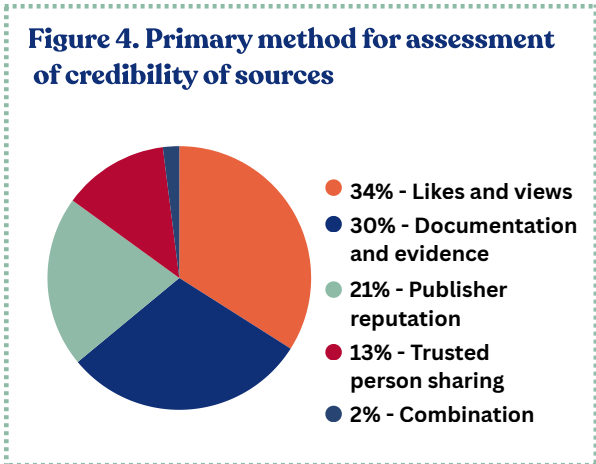
Figure 3. Self-assessed MIL competencies



But, when their practices of engaging with and handling information are examined more closely, the general self-perception of creators as well-equipped to navigate today's complex information environment does not necessarily match reality.

When **assessing the credibility of online sources**, 34% of respondents reported relying on engagement indicators a piece of content receives, notably 'Number of likes and views.' By comparison, 30% assess credibility based on whether evidence and documentation support a claim, while 21% rely primarily on the reputation of the author or publisher.

Similarly, while a majority of respondents (64%) reported systematically checking accuracy of information before sharing it, still more than one-third (36%) **do not systematically verify information**. Among these respondents, 15% reported fact-checking only news-related content, while 11% indicated that they share information without verification if they trust the source.



The sources creators draw upon for content further illustrate the diversity of their information practices. 'Personal experience' and 'Mainstream news media' were the most frequently cited sources, each used by 45.8% of respondents. Almost as many respondents (43.8%) reported relying on 'Their own investigations and interviews with knowledgeable experts.' Meanwhile, 22.9% cited 'Online sources only' as a primary source of information, and an equal proportion reported using Generative AI tools for sourcing content.

The Use of Generative AI

Results show that participants make use of AI in varying degrees with 46% rarely or never using GAI, 31% using it occasionally and 23% using it regularly. The use of Generative AI by respondents ranges from basic applications such as caption assistance, content ideas and editing support to more advanced applications like automated content pipelines, AI-assisted drafting and content research support. Using Generative AI to generate text was dominant at 96% (Q22), while less than a quarter of GAI users in the study reported using it for image, audio, or video generation.

One interview highlighted sophisticated automation where external sources were scraped, analysed, drafted through AI models, and prepared for publishing. Another participant described simpler use, stating "I use ChatGPT to fix my captions."

Figure 6. GAI usage in frequency in content creation

Frequency	Percentage
Rarely/never	45%
Occasionally	32%
Regularly	23%

Between Trust and Authenticity: Generative AI and Ethics

Only a third (33%) of creators consistently disclose their use of Generative AI in the process of content creation. Qualitative data suggests that this limited disclosure is not simply a matter of transparency, but reflects broader tensions around authenticity, creativity, and audience trust.

Participants raised concerns around impact of social media platform incentives on creators' ability to maintain authenticity: posting certain content that may or may not reflect their own original work and "losing" their creativity by making too much use of AI in their content production.

South African content creators stated that they sometimes choose not to disclose their use of AI because of the risk of appearing inauthentic. A key factor for many of the participants was the impact that AI usage (and the awareness thereof by their audience) would have on audience trust.

Figure 7. AI disclosure to audience

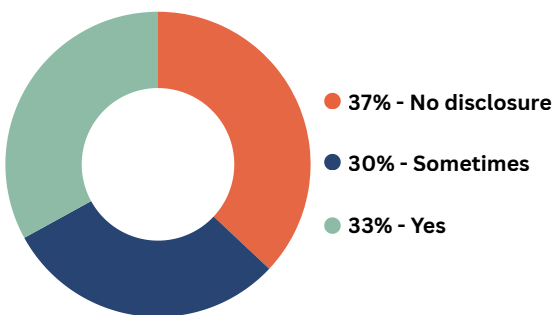
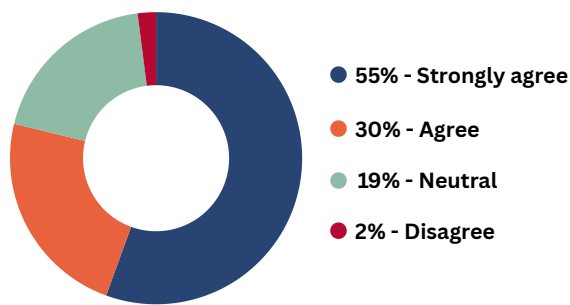


Figure 8. "AI poses a risk to public trust"



"I feel like it's more fake. It has so much fake in it. But your audience would like to see the realness of you. Content creation will lose its value as time goes by because of AI."

"If all you're doing is typing a basic prompt and then copying and pasting it and calling it your own, that is a bit disingenuous. A responsible content creator would normally use AI to fast-track what they are doing and then add personalization and input of their own that makes the content unique."

2.3 Beyond Self-Regulation: Structural Influences on Accountability and Ethical Practice

Survey and interview findings indicate that creators largely perceive ethics and accountability as matters of individual responsibility. A large portion of creators (83%) recognize their influence on audiences while 75% reported worrying to a varying degree about their content's impact on audiences.

"There's normally a consequence to being unethical... it affects your brand or your consumers."

"If you're doing content, you need to be you. Not do something fake, not take another person's content."

Across interviews, creators indicated that they strongly value ethical conduct, but accountability and ethical practice are largely framed as something enacted through self-regulation driven by personal integrity, avoiding harm, audience trust, brand credibility, and common-sense responsibility framed as something intuitive rather than as something guided by explicit codes imposed by formal self-regulatory mechanisms, formal standards on social media platforms or by policy. Furthermore, creators associate ethical conduct as being truthful, avoiding misleading audiences, disclosing paid sponsorships, and ensuring that their content aligns with their personal or brand values.

Most participants described accountability as audience-driven and reactive rather than a proactive process that guides their content creation process. Responses to their own unethical actions in content creation (e.g. hashtag jacking, automated posting and misleading visitors) included deleting posts, issuing corrections, clarifying misinformation, and relying on audience feedback.

"If we call each other out... that's how we can make people take accountability."



I have uploaded stuff with information that was incorrect. But what I did was - when I noticed the comments, people being confused - I responded to the comments, I took the post down, I fixed it, put it back up.



However, the findings also reveal a tension between how creators understand accountability and the broader structures within which content creation occurs. While creators often presented ethical decision-making as intuitive and self-defined, their practices are embedded within platform ecosystems that exert significant influence over behaviour. The production, distribution, and visibility of content are not solely determined by individual values or audience expectations but are shaped by technological, commercial, and governance structures that operate across social media platforms.

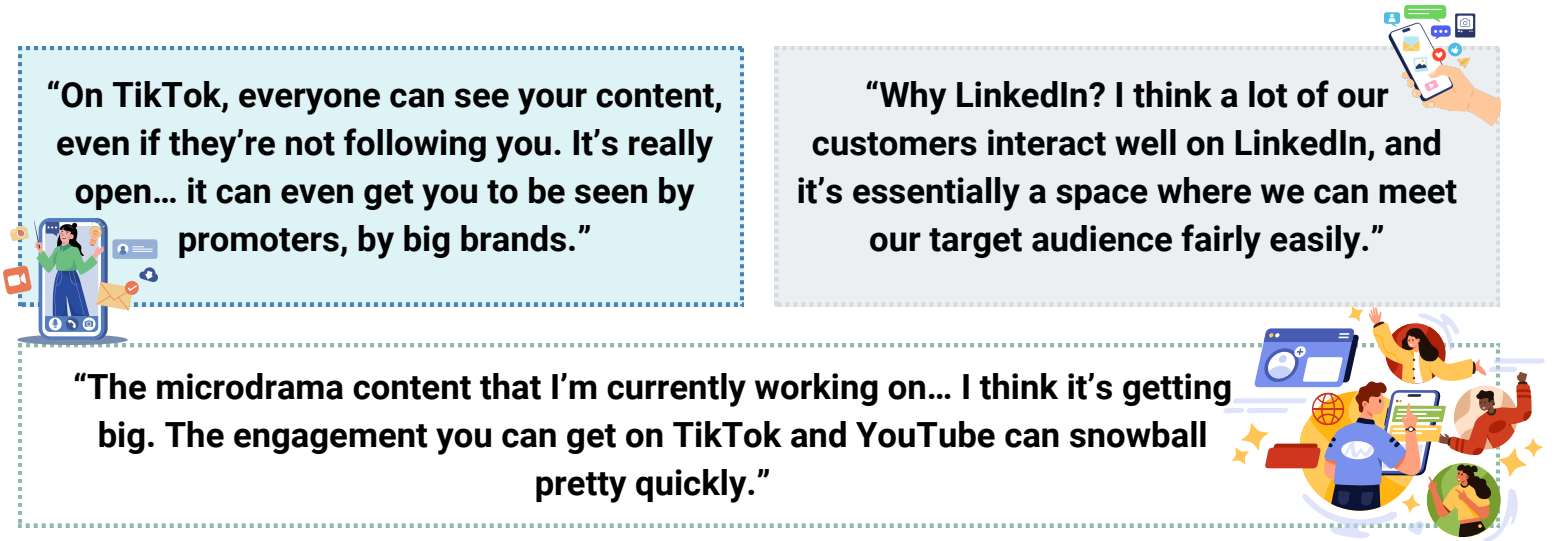
2.3.1 Platform dynamics and algorithmic systems

One important de facto editorial force for content creation is imposed by **platform dynamics and algorithmic systems** through platforms’ content creation and moderation policies and practices.

A. Content curation as editorial force

Content curation is the result of social media platforms using recommendation algorithms and ranking mechanisms to reward particular forms of engagement and visibility. Creators frequently adapt their content strategies in response to perceived algorithmic preferences, audience engagement metrics, and platform-specific trends. Decisions regarding posting styles and frequency, content format, tones used for posts, content choices, and engagement strategies are often informed by the need to maintain visibility and stay relevant within competitive digital environments.

Key differences in tone between platforms	LinkedIn	Facebook / TikTok
	• Professional • Knowledge-driven • Thought leadership oriented	• Engagement-oriented • Trend-sensitive • Emotion-driven dynamics



Many creators described a tension between staying authentic and producing content that performs well. Some admitted to feeling and/or giving in to pressures to follow trends that they may not fully agree with on both ideological and emotional levels. Some reported instances where they prioritized optimizing the reach of their content over their personal values, or produced content catered to specific algorithms. Several described how they strategically use trending sounds, hashtags, and strong visuals because these perform better on specific platforms like TikTok and Instagram.

The survey found that 35% of content creators use ‘Number of likes and views of a post’ as a credibility signal, indicating that post performance often drives the type of content produced or whether the same kinds of content would be produced again. In this sense, credibility was not formally defined but consistently described as trust, authenticity, and ethical reliability.

Some creators criticized "outrage-bait" and controversial tactics used to gain attention, arguing that social media lacks the fact-checking systems present in traditional journalism.

Figure 9. The Authenticity Performance Tension



Despite adapting content to algorithmic incentives, creators rate algorithmic recommendations among the lowest platform attributes at a mean of 3.17/5. This suggests dissatisfaction about how platforms surface and reward their work.

Creators' rating of social media platforms' performance in:

3.17

/ 5

**Algorithm of
content
recommendations**

Being supportive of creators - 3.93

Providing clear content guidelines - 3.83

Providing sufficient technical assistance - 3.67

Users' privacy protection - 3.57

Having sufficient security management - 3.50

Algorithm recommendations - 3.17

B. Content moderation as editorial force

The findings also point to the importance of platform governance through content moderation systems. Although many creators reported limited awareness of formal accountability mechanisms, they nevertheless operate within environments governed by platform rules, community guidelines, and moderation policies. These policies establish boundaries around acceptable content and can affect creators through content removal, demonetisation, account restrictions, reduced visibility, or suspension. Consequently, creators are required to navigate platform-defined standards, even when these standards are perceived as inconsistent, opaque, or poorly enforced.



"You don't know what to post and what's going to happen about it. I post and I go back and check if it's still there because I don't know."

"I posted an honest video — nothing violating anything. It didn't even last an hour, and they said this video is... I'm not even sure what happened. Maybe someone reported me. And then it was a strike for me on TikTok."



2.3.2 Editorial check of brand partnerships and sponsorships

Commercial considerations further complicate the notion of creator autonomy. Access to sponsorship opportunities, platform monetisation programmes, and commercial partnerships can influence content choices, presentation styles, and engagement strategies. The need to maintain brand suitability and commercial viability introduces additional pressures that extend beyond personal ethical commitments, creating a context in which economic incentives become intertwined with ethical decision-making. Some participants pointed to the question of audience trust warning that creators who receive identical brand scripts risk appearing inauthentic towards their audiences.



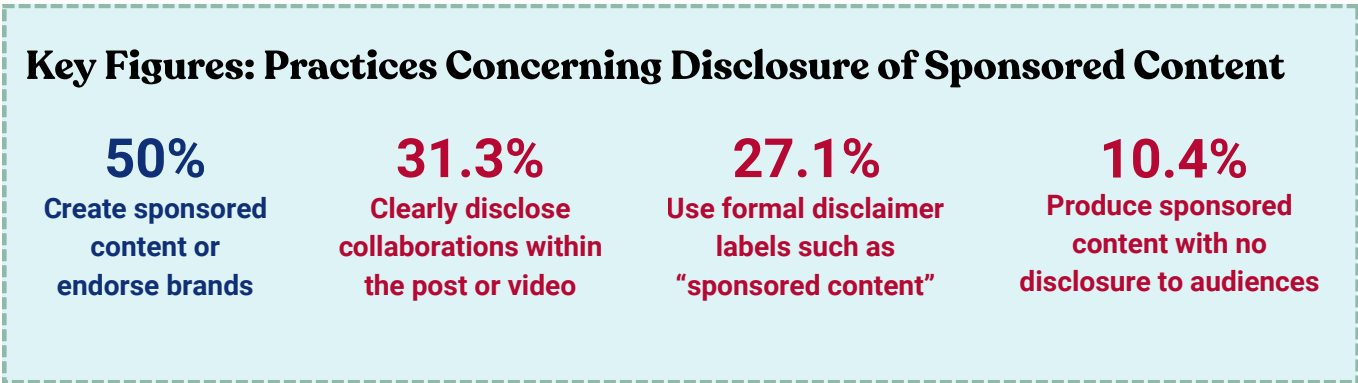
"I turn down campaigns because I'm not just going to endorse a vape or a product that I don't use in my life. I've got the luxury of being able to do that. But for most content creators, this has become their primary source of income."

"You have to create according to what they want or what they desire. Clients don't understand when you say we can't use a particular song — it's only when they see that the video has been rejected that they understand."



Exactly half of creators (50%) create sponsored content or endorse brands and products/services. Among these, 31.3% indicated that they ‘Clearly disclose such collaborations to their audience within the post or video itself,’ while 27.1% reported ‘Using formal disclaimer labels such as “sponsored content” or “brand partnership” placed alongside posts.’ A smaller proportion (10.4%) reported producing sponsored content without explicitly disclosing to audiences that it is paid or branded.

When it comes to sharing performance data, 27.1% of creators indicated that they share data with sponsors, brand partners, or agencies in addition to retaining it for their own reference – pointing to an emerging commercial data-sharing dynamic that sits alongside questions of transparency and audience trust.



2.3.3. Perception of formal self-regulation accountability mechanisms for content creators

Accountability within the creator economy manifests as a multi-layered phenomenon. Audience feedback and community responses remain important mechanisms through which creators evaluate and adjust their behavior. However, accountability and ethical practice are also enforced through platform dynamics and algorithmic incentives, as well as commercial relationships between creators and brands and sponsorships. Together, these factors create a network of formal and informal pressures that shape creator conduct, often without being explicitly recognized as forms of accountability by creators themselves.

Survey results showed that less than 1 in 5 of creators were affiliated with a content creators’ organization or professional association – either national, regional, or international. The organizations named by the small minority of affiliated creators, including SANEF, SAFREA, the National Press Club, and the Marketing Association of South Africa, are oriented primarily toward journalism professionals, freelance media workers, and marketers rather than digital content creators. None offer creator-specific ethical guidance, platform literacy support, or AI resources.

Notably, the South African Content Creators Union (SACCU), the first body specifically established to represent digital creators, was only founded in September 2025 and was still in early development at the time this study was conducted. Its emergence underscores both the timeliness of this research and the significant gap in professional infrastructure for creators that it documents.

A clear majority of creators (87.5%) see value in ethical guidelines or standards to help them better assess the ethical implications of the content they produce: 64.6% see clear benefits in having such standards, while 22.9% are open but are unsure about their practical usefulness. An even greater proportion of creators (91.67%) is optimistic to a varying degree about the benefit of such ethical guidelines (or a code of conduct) in building trust with their followers or making their brand more appealing to advertisers.

“There should be an ethical code of conduct because it would help everybody to know that they can trust us as content creators... that will help with the trust and authenticity aspect of the audiences. Because if one content creator breaks that with whatever behavior, then it makes the communities online distrust all of us.”

The creators showed a strong appetite for capacity-building opportunities with 87% indicating an interest in training on ethics and freedom of expression. When asked about the preferred type of support, most (41.7%) identified ‘Practical training and workshops’ as the preferred option, followed by an ‘Online repository of curated resources tailored for digital content creators’ (31.3%).

Digital content creators expressed specific interest in:

- Peer learning opportunities
- MIL and platform literacy education to better understand the platforms they use
- Guidance on ethics and AI
- Training on legal awareness to understand the laws and regulations that govern their content creation activities, including freedom of expression, defamation, copyright and intellectual property, sponsored content disclosure obligations, and platform liability

There is an absence of structured training, support systems, and accessible resources to help creators act on their values ethically and effectively, despite the willingness and desire to do so. This gap between creator influence and support infrastructure is one of the most significant findings in this study.

Education 

- Tailored MIL programs and AI literacy resources
- Guidance for ethical content creation and increased legal awareness

Community Support 

- Peer networks
- Creator communities of practice
- Shared learning spaces

Positive Civic Potential 

- **Creators as educators**
- **Social cohesion messaging**
- **Countering harmful narratives**

2.4 Tech-Facilitated Harms Faced by Creators

2.4.1 Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV)

In response to questions on experiences with Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV), 75% of creators reported either experiencing or witnessing such forms of violence online. 16.7% indicated that they had been personally targeted by TFGBV, while a significantly larger proportion (58.3%) reported having witnessed TFGBV directed at others.

Key Figures: Exposure to Tech-facilitated Harms

43% reported identity-based personal attacks or harassment online	75% experienced or witnessed TFGBV	72% experienced or witnessed xenophobia online	37% experienced real- world violence linked to online attacks
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In terms of the types of TFGBV experienced/witnessed, ‘Cyber harassment’ (defined as “*sustained and/or coordinated threats, insults, and attacks*”) emerged as the most prevalent form, reported by 35.4% of respondents. This was followed by ‘Reputational attacks’ (25%) and ‘Image- or video-based abuse’ (16.7%).

Regarding the tools through which TFGBV occurs, ‘Fake accounts or impersonation profiles’ were reported by 43.8% of respondents, while more broadly ‘Platforms and messaging apps’ were also commonly identified as vectors of abuse, with 35.4% of respondents indicating that incidents occurred through these channels.



“There was an instance where my younger sister was being body shamed and someone was impersonating her account and it took us a long time to get it down. We had to ask a lot of people to report her account.”



“There was a young girl who was allegedly victimized in school, and there was a big advocacy around that. Do I continue to advocate for something when it was loud and now it’s quiet? It creates a lot of frustration and confusion because there’s no answer at the end of it.”

Worryingly, 40% of survey respondents did not report such incidents at all, while 41% indicated reporting them to platforms. Only a small number of creators reported incidents to law enforcement or support organizations. Reasons for not reporting included belief that harm was not serious enough to be reported to platforms and low confidence that any real support would follow once an incident is reported.

South African legal framework and reporting gaps for online harms

The Cybercrimes Act (2020) criminalises malicious disclosure of intimate images and harmful data messages, but awareness of these provisions is limited and enforcement has been inconsistent. Currently there is no dedicated regulatory body or ombudsman with a specific mandate to receive online harm complaints from content creators or the general public. The South African Human Rights Commission and the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) have adjacent mandates but neither offers a direct reporting line for the type of harmful content that creators reported experiencing most: harassment, doxxing, impersonation and TFGBV.

2.4.2 Hate speech, discrimination, harassment, and xenophobia

Nearly half of respondents (43%) reported having been attacked, threatened, harassed, or targeted by **hateful speech online based on aspects of their identity**. A greater proportion (72%) reported having experienced or witnessed xenophobia online – with the majority (62.5%) occurring in the context of immigration. A worrying proportion of creators (37%) also reported having experienced real-world violence in connection to online attacks and threats.

This dynamic can be seen taking place in the context of a recent spate of in-person anti-immigrant protests in South Africa. In this instance, continued online xenophobia has fueled offline protests and in extreme cases, physical violence.

2.4.3 Emotional Labour and Digital Content Creator Wellbeing as an Under-Recognised Pressure

Interviewees highlighted emotional strain as a major but under-addressed issue. Challenges reported by participants included pressure to stay relevant, discouragement from low engagement with owned content and burnout risk.



“You may get less engagement and get discouraged... some people even quit.”

The combination of worry about the impact of their content on audiences, ethical dilemmas, and exposure to a plethora of tech-facilitated harms can create psychological strain that affects creator wellbeing and participation by reducing their motivation, confidence and sustainability in the industry.

Information Risks

- Misinformation
- Weak verification practices
- Credibility shaped by engagement signals

Ethical Risks

- Inconsistent digital ethics standards
- Poorly governed AI use
- Undisclosed promotions

Platform Risks

- Algorithmic pressure
- Authenticity-performance tension

Safety Risks

- Hate speech and harassment
- TFGBV
- Xenophobia

Wellbeing Risks

- Burnout
- Emotional strain
- Discouragement

3. About the Surveyed Digital Content Creators

Demographics

Survey respondents were largely:

- Between ages 25–44 (73%)
- Evenly distributed by gender (52% men and 48% women)

Experience and Educational Background

Most of the creators surveyed (81%) had been creating content for over three years, signalling that mostly established creators were represented in the study, while only 1 in 5 were relatively new to the industry (with less than 3 years of content creation experience).

The majority of respondents are **micro-creators** – 72% have fewer than 100K followers, with the largest single group (36%) in the 10K-100K range, suggesting the sample skews towards emerging and mid-tier creators.

Follower/Subscriber Count on Main Social Media Platform

- **17% (n=8): Fewer than 1,000**
- **34% (n=16): 1K – 10K**
- **36% (n=17): 10K – 100K**
- **11% (n=5): 100K – 1M**
- **2% (n=1): 1M+**

Main Social Media Platform for Public Content

- **Largest share (72%): Facebook (35%), X (20%), and Instagram (17%)**
- **Smaller shares for TikTok, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, and YouTube**

Facebook is the dominant platform among respondents (35%), followed by X/Twitter (20%) and Instagram (17%). Together these three platforms account for nearly three-quarters of the sample's primary content channels.

Content Genres and Type of Content Formats

Most of creators (64%) identify themselves purely as "digital content creators" with far fewer percentages going to other titles such as 'Citizen journalist,' 'Influencer,' 'YouTuber,' or 'TikToker.'

The mix of topics creators dedicate themselves to suggests a sample engaged with both civic and consumer content. 'Current affairs, politics, and economy' is the most common content category, followed closely by lifestyle topics including fashion, photography, travel and shopping. This mix suggests a sample engaged with both civic and consumer content.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study highlights a digital creator ecosystem characterized by innovation, ethical aspiration, growing responsibility and significant structural challenges. As their influence continues to expand, so too does the importance of understanding the conditions under which they operate and the support required to enable ethical and resilient content creation.

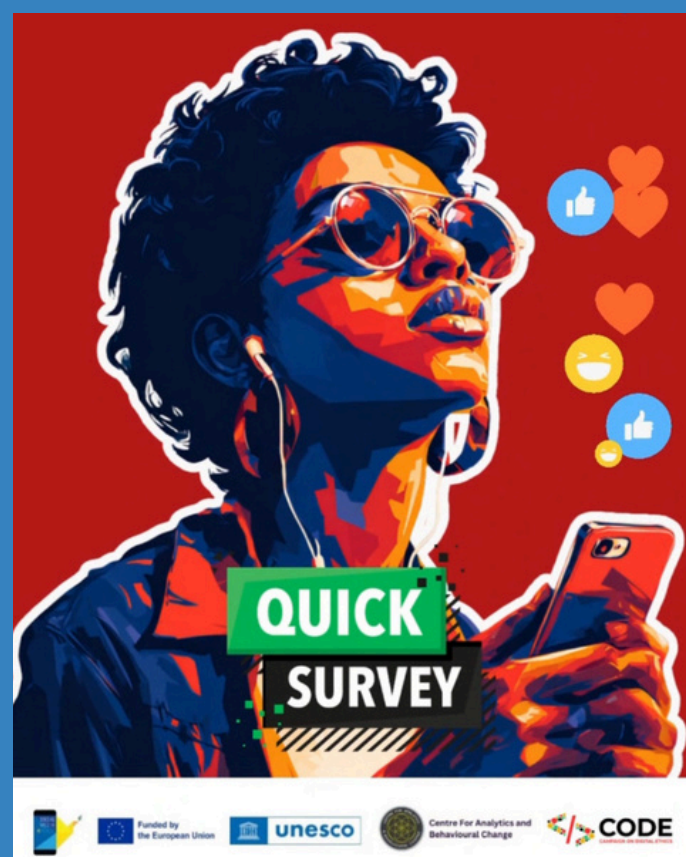
The findings reveal a creator ecosystem characterized by strong civic motivation, ethical aspirations, and a willingness to engage responsibly with audiences, but also by considerable structural constraints. Creators generally recognise the impact of their content and express confidence in their media and information literacy competencies. However, this confidence is not always reflected in everyday information practices, particularly regarding systematic verification, source assessment, and responsible use of generative AI. These gaps do not primarily reflect a lack of commitment but rather the absence of structured opportunities to develop practical competencies in an increasingly complex digital environment.

The research also highlights that creators' ethical choices are shaped not only by individual values but by the broader digital infrastructures within which they operate. Platform algorithms, content moderation and curation policies and practices, commercial partnerships, monetisation incentives, and audience expectations all function as powerful editorial influences that shape visibility, sustainability, and content decisions. Ethical content creation should therefore be understood as the product of interactions between creators, platforms, audiences, and institutional environments rather than as an individual responsibility alone.

Equally significant is the evidence documenting creators' exposure to technology-facilitated harms, including gender-based violence, hate speech, harassment, and xenophobia. Combined with the constant pressure to remain visible, relevant, and commercially sustainable, these experiences create substantial emotional labour that remains largely unrecognised within current creator support ecosystems. The sustainability of the creator economy therefore depends not only on technical or professional development but also on stronger measures that protect creators' safety, wellbeing, and psychological resilience.

Based on the evidence generated through this study, priority actions should include:

- **Develop Creator-Focused MIL Programmes** that move beyond awareness-raising to strengthen practical verification skills, information sourcing, critical evaluation, responsible content production, and freedom of expression within creators' everyday workflows.
- **Develop Practical Guidance for Ethical AI Use in Content Creation**, including voluntary disclosure practices, authenticity safeguards, copyright awareness, and ethical integration of AI into creative processes.
- **Support Peer Learning Networks for Creators** that facilitate mentorship, knowledge exchange, collaborative problem-solving, and the development of context-sensitive ethical norms for digital content creation.
- **Strengthen Support around Online Harm and Safety**, including practical guidance on responding to TFGBV, hate speech, harassment, and coordinated online attacks; improved awareness of reporting and support mechanisms; digital safety training; and initiatives addressing burnout, emotional labour, and psychological resilience associated with sustained content creation.
- **Involve Creators in Digital Platform Governance Dialogues**, including structured opportunities for creators to engage with and learn about recommendation systems, content moderation and curation policies, monetisation models, platform accountability mechanisms, and broader governance frameworks.
- **Establish an Online Repository and Awareness-Raising Initiatives on Legal and Regulatory Frameworks for Digital Creation**, providing accessible, regularly updated information on relevant laws, regulations, and industry standards and providing clear guidance on creators' rights, obligations, and duties.



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