

“I’m Not Just a Content Creator”: Digital Cultural Communicators Dealing with Celebrity Capital and Online Communities

ISABEL VILLEGAS-SIMÓN*¹
ONA ANGLADA-PUJOL
MARÍA CASTELLVÍ LLOVERAS
MERCÈ OLIVA²
Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Spain

This article focuses on a particular type of social media content creator: those specialized in culture, art, or political content (“digital cultural communicators”). Our main aim is to better understand digital cultural communicators’ views on being or becoming a celebrity and their relationships and interactions with their audiences. To fulfill this aim, we draw upon in-depth interviews with 18 Spanish digital cultural communicators who post content on more than one platform (TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitch). The interviews were transcribed and qualitatively analyzed using thematic analysis and the software ATLAS.ti. The results show that digital cultural communicators try to distance themselves from social media celebrities and present themselves as legitimate cultural workers (and not “just” content creators). Their views on celebrities also shape their discourses about their audiences (presented as educated individuals) and how they deal with positive and negative comments.

Keywords: microcelebrity, digital cultural communicators, digital content creators, social media, relational labor, emotional labor, celebrity capital, hate speech, community, field migration

The advent of digital platforms has been tied to the rise of digital content creators, who have become powerful actors in contemporary media ecologies. Multiple names have been used to identify them in both plain English and academic scholarship, including TikTokers, YouTubers, streamers, influencers, and

Isabel Villegas-Simón: isabelmaria.villegas@upf.edu

Ona Anglada-Pujol: ona.anglada@upf.edu

María Castellví Lloveras: maria.castellvi@upf.edu

Mercè Oliva: merce.oliva@upf.edu

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BookTubers. Some of these labels highlight the platform where these creators upload their content and others the type of content they create (e.g., the name “influencers” usually refers to lifestyle, fashion, and beauty content). Moreover, a growing body of scholars has analyzed these creators’ contents and practices (Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2017; Marwick, 2015, 2016).

Nevertheless, there is a specific kind of digital content creator that has been understudied, although they have specific traits about their aims and content, which differ from others, such as influencers or gamers. These digital creators are characterized by how (a) their content addresses cultural, political, and artistic topics; (b) their objective is to transmit knowledge informally and reach the general public; and (c) they are usually experts in a particular cultural field (e.g., history, art, music, philosophy). They create online videos to explain concepts in a captivating way that sustains the interests of their nonexpert audiences. In doing so, they use entertainment techniques, such as humor, storytelling, or metaphors, to connect and engage the public. We term this type of creator “digital cultural communicators” to establish equivalence with science communicators (Erviti & Stengler, 2016). The presence of this kind of content creator has expanded on social media, and we find several examples in different contexts, from Contrapoints, Nerdwriter, and Lindsay Ellis in the United States to Jaime Altozano and Ter in Spain.

Although they have traits that set them apart from other content creators, such as influencers and streamers, digital cultural communicators also deal with the particularities of working on digital platforms, namely mandatory visibility (Bishop, 2019), instability, and precarity (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017), and emotional and affective work needed to manage their communities (Guarriello, 2019). Such traits place digital cultural communicators on a middle ground between traditional cultural workers (e.g., writers, journalists, and artists) and other kinds of digital creators, such as influencers or streamers, whose content is more focused on entertainment and publicly exposing their daily private lives. Thus, digital creators who specialize in cultural content have to deal with the tension between being viewed as a digital celebrity (or microcelebrity; Abidin, 2018; Jerslev, 2016; Marwick, 2015; Senft, 2008) and cultural legitimacy, especially when they want to migrate from the digital realm to traditional and legacy sectors (e.g., publishing, television broadcasting). This path could be quite fraught since being a digital creator is not yet fully recognized as a “real” profession (Deller & Murphy, 2020). Therefore, digital cultural communicators’ status as digital figures could potentially conflict with their aspirations because their public perceptions are still in dispute.

The main objective is to study digital cultural communicators’ views of online celebrities and how these perceptions affect their practices, aspirations, and relationships with their followers. Perceptions of celebrities and relationships with followers are interrelated because the way they conceptualize their celebrity capital influences how they view their followers and their practices with them. To fulfill this aim, 18 semistructured interviews were conducted with Spanish digital cultural communicators who were in an “aspiration phase” (i.e., they were starting to monetize their content). The analysis of their views on fame will help us better understand the motivations, objectives, and characteristics of individuals who decide to become content creators and use social media to share their knowledge. The study of how digital cultural communicators view celebrities and their communities of followers, and how these stances shape their aspirations and labor practices remains underexplored. Thus, our ultimate goal is to delve into an

understudied but emergent digital figure to identify its particularities and thus enrich the scholarly literature on platform society.

Literature Review

Content Creators, Microcelebrity, and Emotional and Relational Labor

Content creators have been defined in scholarship as “microcelebrities” (Jerslev, 2016; Marwick, 2015, 2016; Senft, 2008). This concept highlights the changing nature of social media celebrity: It is no longer what a person is, but “something that people do” (Marwick, 2015, p. 140). In this regard, content creators deploy microcelebrity as a communicative practice, “a self-presentation technique in which people view themselves as a public persona to be consumed by others” (Marwick, 2016, p. 333). However, in recent years, the definition of microcelebrity has been a source of scholarly debate. As digital content creators, such as influencers, YouTubers, and streamers, have increasingly achieved mainstream celebrity status and reached audiences of millions of followers, some authors have challenged the usefulness of microcelebrity as a term to make sense of contemporary online celebrities (Abidin, 2018). Moreover, influencers’ and YouTubers’ activities are no longer limited to social media but are now embedded in the entertainment industry, actively collaborating with legacy media, brands, traditional celebrities, and events. In this regard, authors such as Abidin (2018) propose “Internet celebrities” to define “all media formats (people, products, icons, figures, etc.) that attain prominence and popularity native to the Internet” and very often “rival or surpass traditional celebrities in terms of global popularity or reach” (p. 15). Nevertheless, we argue that “microcelebrity” retains its usefulness in analyzing digital cultural communicators for two reasons. First, these specific content creators have niche audiences interested in the topics addressed in their content. Second, given that our aim is to better understand their online practices and how they are presented to others, the concept of microcelebrity appears to be the most appropriate.

The emergence of microcelebrity can be seen as an example of contemporary processes of the *celebritization* of society, in which “individuals have a potential advantage when they are media savvy and able to become media personalities or celebrities” (Driessens, 2013b, p. 650). Driessens (2013b) views this process of celebritization as the result of mediatization, individualization, and commodification, which simultaneously changes how celebrity culture works, resulting in the democratization and diversification of the term celebrity. Abidin (2016) defined microcelebrities as ordinary individuals who develop careers by narrating their lives and monetizing their efforts on social media. As opposed to the traditional separation between celebrity and audience (Senft, 2008), microcelebrities depend on their connections with their followers. Likewise, while conventional celebrities are expected to protect their privacy, microcelebrities rely on intimate and emotional aspects of their personal lives to capture attention (Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2015). Therefore, the interpersonal mode of connecting and relating to an audience constitutes the core of microcelebrity practices (Senft, 2013). Microcelebrities’ personas are constructed upon the “display of accessibility, presence, and authenticity” (Jerslev, 2016, p. 5235), closing the gap between them and their audiences. They portray themselves as “ordinary” and “relatable,” blurring the lines between personal and professional life by creating content from their homes and discussing their own lives (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Jerslev & Mortensen,

2015). Moreover, they combine this performance of authenticity with intense "self-branding" and the establishment of commercial relationships with brands and products.

Microcelebrities are central figures in contemporary labor imaginaries. They are also the target of a heated debate about "deserving" and "undeserving" forms of celebrity and whether what they *do* can be considered "work" (Deller & Murphy, 2020). Furthermore, digital content creators are presented as new "model workers" and digital entrepreneurs (Duffy, 2017) within the context of the attention economy (Marwick, 2015). Thus, digital platforms present an opportunity to gain economic and celebrity capital by "doing what you love." Consequently, the notions of work and celebrity are interrelated in the process of becoming a successful content creator.

A fundamental step in becoming a microcelebrity is to create a digital community by accumulating and keeping followers. Followers are addressed and discursively constructed in multiple ways. On the one hand, social media platforms encourage content producers to conceptualize their followers as fans (Marwick, 2015). On the other hand, content creators tend to construct an image of "personal connection" and accessibility, which is based on an (imagined) closer relationship with their audience, creating the illusion of a bidirectional relationship (Jerslev, 2016), presenting themselves in stark contrast with mainstream and media celebrities. To achieve this, digital content creators must carry out "emotional" and "relational" labor. Performing emotional labor has been conceptualized as a "mode of labor pertaining to everyday users who are becoming self-made cultural producers" (Duguay, 2019, p. 3). Emotional labor involves managing and displaying certain emotions as part of the job (Hochschild, 1983). For instance, performing "passion" and positive emotions on the camera is one of the "requirements" for creative digital workers (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). Likewise, portraying intimate aspects in their content and sharing them with their followers has been considered a practice of emotional and affective labor (Raun, 2018). In both cases, these practices linked to emotional labor seek to generate affect and grab audiences' attention since intimate affective labor allows the audience to find others like themselves and participate in their everyday lives (Raun, 2018). In this sense, Duffy (2017) states that emotional labor allows an instrumental approach to affective relationships with a digital audience.

Similarly, creating and maintaining a digital community has also been linked to relational work (Baym, 2018). Baym (2018) described relational work as "ongoing, interactive, effective, material, and cognitive-communicative work with people sustained over time and aimed at creating structures that enable sustainable work" (p. 19). Within the digital context, relational work is unique because digital creators are perceived by their audiences more as friends than as celebrities, and content creators are obliged to establish and maintain relationships with their followers to build and sustain their careers (Baym, 2018). This involves portraying themselves constantly as attentive, kind, and transparent to gain different economic and emotional support (Guarriello, 2019). Thus, while emotional labor focuses on managing feelings and personal issues to connect with the audience/fans, relational labor refers to creating and maintaining a digital community.

Consequently, both concepts reflect the fact that although digital working relationships can be meaningful, they are all inherently utilitarian (Bonifacio, Hair, & Wohn, 2021), since they are based on the creator's economic dependence on their followers versus the development of authentic peer-to-peer

relationships. For years, several creators have publicly explained the cost of affective labor and constant visibility and the toll of the demands of personalized media economies (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017; Guarriello, 2019). This is more acute for women who also face systematic online harassment (Döring, 2019; Sobieraj, 2018) and the threat of losing their digital reputations (De Ridder, 2021).

Celebrity Migration and the Field of Cultural Production

Celebrities and microcelebrities can use their status and fame to move from one sphere to another. For example, some YouTubers and influencers might publish comic books, appear on television, or launch their own makeup or clothing brands. Following Bourdieu's (1993) field theory and Driessens's (2013c) work on celebrity, this move can be conceptualized as a *migration*, meaning "the mobility within and across certain social fields of people using their celebrity status" from one field to another (Driessens, 2013c, p. 645).

According to Driessens (2013b), celebrity can be viewed as a specific form of capital linked with "recognizability" and visibility and distinct from other kinds of capital identified by Bourdieu (1993): economic capital, symbolic capital (status, recognition, and prestige; p. 75), cultural capital (taste, qualifications, knowledge, and possession of cultural artifacts), and social capital ("possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition"; Bourdieu, 1997, p. 51). Thus, migration is possible because celebrity capital can be exchanged for the economic, symbolic, and social capital that helps them enter other fields. Nevertheless, this migration is not always easy since symbolic capital is not always convertible from one field to another. For example, while an influencer might have the celebrity, economic, and social capital to publish a book, they might not be recognized as legitimate literary authors since they lack the specific cultural capital that is valued within the literary field (as in the case of several influencers; Deller & Murphy, 2020; Lutton, 2019). Thus, this "upward migration" from one field to another with more cultural legitimacy can be tricky and entail some dangers for celebrities, as their position in the new field can be highly contested (Giles, 2015).

Bourdieu sees the social world as organized through different fields (the cultural field, the economic field, the political field, etc.) "governed by their own 'rules of the game' and offering their own particular economy of exchange and rewards" (Benson, 1998, p. 464). This means that fields are hierarchized: Each actor and each work has its own position, determined by its accrued capital. Nevertheless, these positions and "rules of the game" are not totally fixed, since in each field there are always two principles of hierarchization at play: the *autonomous* and the *heteronomous*. The autonomous rules of hierarchization refer to "specific principles of evaluation of practices and works" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 163), while heteronomous ones refer to criteria that come from other fields (such as the economic or the political field). For example, in the field of cultural production, the autonomous pole is connected to "artistic prestige," while the heteronomous pole "is *success*, as measured by indices such as book sales" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 38).

To better understand celebrity migration, we must understand how the cultural field (or the field of cultural production) works. Bourdieu (1993) sees the cultural field as organized through an "inverted economy" principle, in which immediate "commercial" success is equated with low symbolic and cultural

capital. In contrast, symbolic capital is accumulated *in the long run*, since legitimate art is expected to explore formal rules. Moreover, this is a field governed by a “principle of disinterestedness,” in which cultural producers who “go commercial’ condemn themselves . . . because they deprive themselves of the opportunities open to those who . . . by concealing from themselves and others the interests at stake in their practice, obtain the means of deriving profits from disinterestedness” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 75).

Social media content creation can be viewed as a specific subfield with its own rules and principles of hierarchization, situated in a contested place within the larger field of cultural production because it is closer to the commercial and the heteronomous pole. However, we can also recognize the principle of disinterestedness in the idea conveyed by the creators themselves of “doing what you love” and “just [having] fun” (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017, p. 6). Furthermore, within the content creators’ subfield, figures with mainstream recognition can be distinguished from others perceived as niche celebrities (Lewis, 2020). Driessens (2014) defined niche celebrities as “individuals who are relatively unknown to the wider public but well-known within certain tastes of fan cultures” (p. 116). For instance, Tomasena (2019) argues that although BookTubers cannot afford the level of popularity needed to become part of the “influencer economy,” they can occupy key positions in certain niche audiences. Lewis (2020) studied reactionary and far-right YouTubers as niche celebrities and found that, even though they present themselves as alternatives to mainstream media, they use the same strategies and share the same values as other digital microcelebrities, such as authenticity and transparency.

Methodology

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- R1: How do social media content creators view celebrities, and how are these views interwoven with their practices and aspirations?*
- R2: What is their relationship with their audience, and how are they affected by audience comments?*

Our research draws on in-depth interviews with 18 aspiring Spanish digital cultural communicators. We purposely selected participants that met all the following criteria: (1) they fall under the category of digital cultural communicators; (2) they have a low to medium range of followers (less than a million); (3) they are active on more than one platform; (4) they monetize their activity as content creators (through subscribers, monetization revenue, or sponsorships); and (5) they have regularly created content for less than five years. These criteria allowed us to gather a set of content creators with similar characteristics, objectives, and experience in social media networks.

The sample comprised nine content creators who identified as cis-women, eight as cis-men, and one as non-binary. All of them posted content on more than one platform. Table 1 shows the participants’ details: the year they started creating content regularly, the genre of their content, the platforms on which they were active, and the follower count of their main platform. Moreover, several participants also carried out other (semi)professional activities outside social media, usually linked to and on account of their channels’ content (such as publishing essays on arts or philosophy, illustrations, and political commentators

in broadcasting media and podcasts). The interviews were conducted through video calls between February and May 2022. The interviews lasted between 45 and 80 minutes each.

Table 1. Participant Information.

ID	Start year	Genre	YouTube	Twitter	TikTok	Twitch	Instagram
Participant01	2013	Arts & culture	✓	✓	8,097	✓	✓
Participant02	2020	Arts & culture	6,460	✓	✓		✓
Participant03	2019	Politics	✓	✓	105,900	✓	✓
Participant04	2020	Philosophy	5,290	✓			✓
Participant05	2020	History	20,100	✓		✓	✓
Participant06	2016	Movies	9,480	✓	✓	✓	✓
Participant07	2020	Politics	✓	✓	✓		11,500
Participant08	2021	Arts & culture	✓		412,500		✓
Participant09	2020	Arts & culture	131,000	✓	✓		✓
Participant10	2016	Politics	9,200		✓		✓
Participant11	2016	Philosophy	✓	49,000			✓
Participant12	2020	Arts & culture	8,062	✓			✓
Participant13	2019	History		✓	✓	✓	✓
			162,000				
Participant14	2020	Politics		✓	333,700		✓
Participant15	2020	Movies	3,730	✓			
Participant16	2008	Movies	58,500	✓	✓		✓
Participant17	2019	Arts & culture	28,900	✓		✓	
Participant18	2017	Arts & culture	921,000	✓	✓	✓	✓

Regarding ethical protocols, the participants signed an informed consent document explaining the research aims, risks, and benefits, and how their personal information would be handled. They could walk away from the interview at any time. All the participants' information was anonymized, and all identifying information or references to their profiles on social networks were excluded to protect their identities. Therefore, whenever direct quotes from the interviews are used, participants will be referred to by a number (e.g., "Participant01").

The interviews focused on their social media trajectory; their relationships with the platforms; their revenue strategies; their relationships with their audiences, followers, and other social media content creators; and their future expectations. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the software ATLAS.ti. All four researchers were actively involved in the coding process and in establishing the final definition of the analysis categories and subcategories.

All the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012), informed by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Thematic analysis allows for a hybrid approach, both deductive and inductive (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). During the literature review, themes and topics were

established and used to design the interviews, while other themes and concepts emerged during the data coding and analysis (Gibbs, 2007).

Results

Celebrity as a Price to Pay

Respondents expressed ambivalent views of the term celebrity. On the one hand, most participants stated that they did not want to be celebrities, actively distancing themselves from this label. On the other hand, they acknowledged that being a successful social media content creator involved attracting views and growing viewership, which could also turn them into celebrities. Thus, celebrity was presented as the “by-product” of working as social media content creators: inevitable if they were successful, but something that they did not deliberately pursue.

The participants expressed extremely negative views of the concept of celebrity and tried to dissociate themselves from the idea that they were attention-seekers or wanted to be well known. This is evident in how they defined themselves, distancing themselves from more popular influencers or streamers (whose content is entertainment, gaming, and beauty), and even disdaining the labels “influencer” or “YouTuber.” Several participants claimed that they did not identify with the label “content creators” and preferred the term *divulgador* (“educator”). By doing this, they distanced themselves from other content creators focused on entertainment (streamers, influencers, YouTubers), whom they view as “undeserving celebrities” (Deller & Murphy, 2020), and claimed their own cultural legitimacy. The participants constantly highlighted their education and qualifications (most emphasized that they had attended university and completed undergraduate studies) and linked their own cultural capital to their social media work and content, which is focused on the arts, philosophy, or political analysis. Thus, they presented themselves as legitimate cultural workers and claimed that they did not want to be recognized only by their social media status:

Before being a creator, I am an illustrator . . . and then everything else will come after that. So, in that sense, it’s like, “do you expect something from social media?” I hope to achieve the visibility that my work deserves, so to speak, and the visibility that I also get by working hard on social media, but [*I view social media*] as a mouthpiece.
(Participant01, cis-woman)

This participant claimed that creating content for social media was *just* one of her professional activities, putting her work as an illustrator at the forefront. Likewise, most of our participants either stated that they did not consider creating content on social media their main professional activity, or they did not want it to become their sole profession, highlighting that they did “so much more,” such as writing and publishing books or organizing conferences and public lectures on art. However, they recognized that social media could help them achieve a professional career in legacy media or give them visibility in other cultural fields.

These tensions and contradictory views about social media, visibility, and celebrity can also be identified in how they define themselves and how others define them. One participant who worked on a television program expressed these tensions:

I'm not just a content creator, but they [*traditional media*] assign me this additional role. At least I have a cachet that maybe someone else wouldn't have. I'm not the social media girl . . . now I have books out and they [*the media*] can present me as a writer and disseminator. (Participant11, cis-woman)

In this case, while social media was presented as the platform that helped her accumulate celebrity capital (visibility) and was key to landing her new job at broadcasting channels, publishing a book was portrayed as what could help her accumulate cultural capital, which could be exchanged for economic capital and value. At the same time, she expressed her struggle not to be perceived as "just a content creator."

Thus, becoming a celebrity (or achieving celebrity capital through social media) was presented as something that could help the participants migrate to other cultural fields, such as publishing, education, public speaking, and traditional media:

If all of a sudden I was stopped by people on the street every day and 500,000 people knew me, I would know that I could make a comic book because I would tell the publisher "I'm this guy. Many people follow me and stop me on the street." (. . .). In that case, I think it would be beneficial for me. If the devil appeared here and told me, "If you signed here in blood, that many people will recognize you," I would be like, "Where should I sign?" (Participant15, cis-man)

This comment shows the participant's ambivalent perception of celebrity: On the one hand, becoming a celebrity is positive and desirable because it can give him enough capital (visibility, symbolic capital) to publish a comic book. Being recognized on the street (a marker of celebrity) was presented as a specific type of capital that could make publishing companies perceive him as a "profitable author." Becoming a celebrity is viewed as an essential benefit to help him achieve his aspirations. On the other hand, celebrity was also presented as something dangerous, as the participant connected it with selling his soul to the devil. This resonates with specific views of the rules of the cultural production field and the low value assigned to "large-scale cultural production" (Bourdieu, 1993, pp. 125–131), such as mainstream media, popular influencers, and YouTubers, as well as the idea that creators need to compromise their content to reach a bigger audience (thus becoming "sell-outs"). Other authors analyzing different celebrities' views on fame (Aslama, 2009, about reality TV participants who became popular; Driessens, 2013a, on Flemish media celebrities) have also identified an ambivalent discourse about celebrity status, trying to distance themselves from notions of "underserving celebrity" and highlighting the idea of merit. For our participants, they discussed celebrity in different terms, defining it in pejorative terms and linking it to concepts such as banality, self-interest, or vanity.

To counteract the peril of being seen as a "sell-out" or perceived as "too interested" in achieving fame, the participants followed two discursive strategies. First, they claimed that becoming a celebrity was

not a goal, but the “price to pay” for being social media content creators. Second, they presented themselves as “niche celebrities.” Several participants claimed that they *just* wanted to be recognized by people from a specific *milieu*, particularly people with the “same interests” as them (meaning, *educated* audiences linked to creative and cultural fields). In contrast to the massive audiences associated with banal commercial and cultural tastes, they claimed to have restrictive audiences and framed their activities within the “field of restricted cultural production” (Bourdieu, 1993, pp. 115–125) linked to cultural legitimization.

They further argued that their social recognition came from helping and serving as referents for other people. In this way, the participants interpreted and justified their fame by emphasizing that they were helpful and contributed to their community. As one participant explained: “I really like to hear myself reflected back through what they say, like, ‘Thanks to what you said I can now have a conversation with another person about certain issues’” (Participant03, cis-man). Here, he claimed he gained recognition and sees himself as a kind of “mentor” to help others improve.

Finally, most participants also considered celebrity dangerous because of its fleeting and uncontrollable nature. They claimed that they needed to protect themselves emotionally and be aware of the ups and downs it entailed since gaining and losing celebrity status were seen as something that could impact their mental health. Likewise, one of the participants claimed:

Being a celebrity has never been something that lasts for too long, but social media fame is incredibly fleeting. I don’t think that’s a problem as long as you know that it [*losing celebrity*] can happen at any time, and that you don’t believe that it [*celebrity*] is going to last forever. Therefore, it is also important to have escape routes, because if everything depends on that, the moment it is all over, you would feel like crap or become someone who lives on the memory of what you once were. There is nothing worse than that in social media. (Participant03, cis-man)

Social media celebrities have been viewed as having accelerated “fame cycles” (Deller, 2016), with rapid changes from being a celebrity to being a “has-been.” Therefore, protecting themselves from the potential loss of celebrity capital is a task that involves the affective and emotional management of themselves as a mode of labor (Duguay, 2019). Migrating to other cultural fields was presented as an “escape route” or “plan B” in order to not depend on social media platforms to earn a living, and to protect their mental health.

Thus, the participants expressed an ambivalent view of the term celebrity. This concept stirred up some discomfort during the interviews, as the participants felt the need to justify (and downplay) their interest in being well-known social media creators while also acknowledging the importance of accumulating visibility and celebrity capital to be successful and become media and cultural industry professionals. These tensions are specific to digital cultural communicators, as in their discourses (and practices), they adopt and adapt the rules of cultural production and apply them to social media, which creates contradictions.

Similarly, the participants' views of celebrities impacted how they perceived their audience and followers and how they interacted with them. In the next section, we present the results of the analysis of the participants' discourses about their audiences.

From Friends to Numbers: Views on Followers and Community-Building

The participants' views on their relationships with their followers and audiences can be conceptualized as two poles on a continuum: They view them either as "friends" (i.e., a close, horizontal relationship) or as "numbers" (i.e., the number of followers, view counts, or channel statistics).

Regarding the audience as friends, followers were often referred to as part of a "community" where a close relationship could be forged between them and the creators. The respondents often saw their followers as equals and as individuals with the same interests and goals. They perceived this kind of follower as legitimate, since they shared cultural, political, and artistic affinities, reinforcing their cultural capital, rather than seeing them as emotionally excessive or just mindless fanatics. As we have seen, this strategy is used to frame their content as niches and to present themselves as legitimate cultural workers. They avoid the term "fan" as a way of distancing themselves from other forms of celebrity that they perceive as banal or "undeserving" (Deller & Murphy, 2020) who treat their audiences as fans. In many cases, the participants blurred the differences between them as creators or experts and their audience, putting themselves and their followers at the same level. For example, one participant who focused on sharing artistic content said that "it's a lovely community . . . the majority of people are also artists or aspiring artists, very creative people" (Participant18, cis-woman). Moreover, they conceptualized their followers as reliable sources of knowledge and claimed that they often learned through their feedback and comments. This learning experience and putting themselves on par with their audience can be seen in this participant's comment:

I have a community of very smart people. . . . There are well-educated people that leave their opinions and write very long texts adding information to the video, and people that say, "I think this is right, but here I believe that you are a little wrong because I know another source that says the opposite," but they are always very respectful.
(Participant05, cis-woman)

For example, some of them recalled that their relationships with their followers often got closer, and some even became friends: "Now some of them are friends of mine. They have seen me grow and there's a really good feel" (Participant11, cis-woman). However, their ability to create bonds with their followers depended on the platform. The participants preferred platforms that allowed them to converse directly with their close communities. The platform mentioned most in this case was Twitch, which they enjoyed because they could engage in immediate dialogue with their audience. As one of the respondents pointed out, "Twitch is very cool because you create a healthy community in which you can talk and interact, and people consider you part of their lives because you're there with them" (Participant17, cis-man). This feeling of closeness was also very strong on Discord servers, where followers could join and share their interests with other followers and talk to the content creator without creators having the burden of creating

new content: "In a Discord server, you can do whatever you want: comment on videos with followers, talk about whatever comes up, and upload videos" (Participant08, cis-man).

At the same time, the content creators claimed that they tried to stay close to their audiences on other platforms, even if it was not as enjoyable as Twitch or Discord. They discussed liking and answering all the YouTube comments to maintain a tight bond with their audiences, which was seen as drudgery and not as rewarding as immediate conversation. One participant told us, "It makes me anxious to be so alert to answering comments [on YouTube] . . . I do not answer all of them; sometimes I just give them a like, but I think it's cool to do it" (Participant09, non-binary). Therefore, performing relational labor (Baym, 2018) was perceived as enjoyable and was emphasized as a positive aspect of their work, while it was also viewed as an obligation that was exhausting and stressful.

Participants' perception of their followers as equals and almost friends coexists with the view of followers as numbers or viewing counts. For example, as a participant reflected on his audience and achievements, he conceptualized his community as a number he had reached: "Now I have 8,000 followers, and it doesn't seem like such a big number. In the end, it's the goals you set for yourself" (Participant06, cis-man). Monitoring the "numbers" achieved by their posts and publications (likes, followers, and views) was presented as one of their obligations as content creators. Similarly, they expressed deep concern about the impact that social media's "attention economy" could have on them and their mental health. Many participants claimed that they had to set limits and self-regulate their monitoring of views and follower statistics. One way of doing so was to avoid checking the statistics too often: "I try not to look at it too much, but I get addicted to statistics . . . I just deleted the YouTube Pro app from my phone" (Participant15, cis-man). Others claimed that they tried not to attach much importance to it since they could not control how the platforms' algorithms displayed their content: "I prefer not to think about it. That's what I've learned through years of therapy: if you don't have the power to change something, the best you can do is to focus on something that is within your control" (Participant13, cis-man). Nevertheless, as this quote shows, distancing themselves from the statistics and "numbers" was perceived as difficult and required work and self-discipline. This requirement to self-manage emotions is a form of emotional labor, and many participants mentioned the strategies they used to cope with statistics and follower counts. Thus, the participants expressed contradictory feelings about monitoring their posts' performance as an obligation, but also as a threat to their mental well-being.

Safe Spaces and Reciprocal Care

For our participants, dealing with the audience's comments was another essential aspect of being a content creator, which connected to becoming a public figure. Most of the creators admitted to being affected by positive and negative comments and feedback, highlighting the link between these comments and their mental well-being. In their discussion about how they interacted with and managed comments, the participants often made a distinction between comments from members of their "community of followers" and comments from "external audiences," who were portrayed as "outsiders" and "threats," since they could be the source of negative comments and hate speech. Thus, some participants tried to manage this tension by claiming that they did not care about comments from followers with whom they did not have a close bond: "I really don't care if they like the pictures, I just want my close circle to like them. I don't

care if a random person comments on my Instagram post" (Participant16, cis-man). Here again, we see the duality between their close communities and their follower counts, as explained in the previous section, which can also be viewed as a way of setting boundaries with their audiences (Bonifacio et al., 2021).

Hate speech was one of the main issues that the creators who identified as women or non-binary highlighted when describing the negative aspects of being a public figure. While the male creators tended to perceive online harassment and aggressive interactions with users as rare, the female and non-binary participants shared the perception of being very exposed to hate speech and recognized it as a direct threat to their mental health (Döring, 2019; Sobieraj, 2018).

Reflecting on what elements triggered the hate speech they received, some female respondents pointed to the topics addressed in their videos. They perceived that certain types of content were more likely to stir aggressive responses, particularly political and feminist content. For example, a participant who defined herself as both a content creator and an illustrator said, "In my community, there is barely any hate or negative comments. I think it's because my content doesn't provoke it" (Participant18, cis-woman). The content creators were very aware of what kinds of posts were more likely to result in harassment and hate. It was something that they learned either through their own experiences or by making sense of other content creators' situations. In this regard, another interviewed YouTuber stated that seeing other women subjected to hate, online aggression, and intimidation considerably impacted how she managed her content and that she set limitations on her opinions and discourses in response:

At the beginning, you don't dare get your hands dirty with certain kinds of things. There were topics such as feminism or anti-capitalism that I didn't dare tackle in my first videos. Nowadays, I have a support network of users and other content creators and I openly talk about this sort of thing. (Participant04, cis-woman)

This quote shows how hate speech can shape and affect the topics addressed by women and non-binary content creators and the importance of having a community of followers and other content creators who act as safety nets. Many female respondents conveyed the need to create safe spaces for themselves and their followers as a self-defense mechanism and expressed a preference for platforms that allowed for more intimate and direct interactions with their followers. They included YouTube, where they felt they could create a specific community and receive comments from followers interested in their content, and Twitch, where they could interact with followers immediately and directly. They were presented as "safe spaces" that could help content creators *and* their audiences, highlighting their "reciprocal care," where they mutually supported and protected each other. One participant explained, "When I'm having an identity crisis and I'm tired of everything, many followers that don't usually interact with my content tell me 'we are here; even if you don't see us, we are here'" (Participant10, cis-woman). Thus, followers were presented as emotional support for the content creators that helped them cope with the platform's demands (Bonifacio et al., 2021; Guarriello, 2019). Similarly, digital cultural communicators presented their "community" as beneficial for their followers as well, especially for audiences struggling with mental health issues or feeling lonely: "Maybe for that person, my [Twitch] streams are the only nice moment they have during the whole day . . . I like the fact that my streams are a refuge for people" (Participant01, cis-woman).

Thus, building these close communities as safe spaces was presented as a way of protecting themselves from negative comments and hate, which were perceived as coming from “outsiders” or people not from their community:

Very recently some of my TikTok videos went viral because a guy discovered my work and I made a video in response to him. I didn't have any intention to go viral, I didn't use any hashtags or anything, but this video just exploded. Suddenly, I had thousands of new followers, loads of views, and a lot of negative comments. Many people love stepping on others, but honestly I don't care what they say anymore; they don't know me or my work. They've only seen me in one TikTok video, but they don't know me. (Participant01, cis-woman)

Thus, virality is seen as something that might be dangerous. Several participants recounted how when one of their posts or videos had become viral, they had been attacked with negative comments from these “outsider” audiences. Nevertheless, there is a negotiation between the perceived dangers of the fast circulation and viralization of their contents and the benefits that they can gain from it. One of the interviewees expressed these contradictions as follows:

It goes both ways: when your content is shared by bigger profiles [*content creators with many followers*], you're going to receive hate as well as visibility, and you'll reach people that may be interested in you. You're definitely going to grow because of this, but at the expense of your mental health. I think it's not worth it. (Participant04, cis-woman)

Overall, these content creators find themselves torn between the need to play by the platform rules to gain visibility and the risks that this entails (Cotter, 2022), which simultaneously creates tension with their legitimation and cultural capital.

Digital cultural communicators face the idea of celebrity through the constant tension between the need to be visible and the perils of cultural legitimization and mental health issues. They are aware that gaining visibility is required to achieve their professional aspirations and reach the followers they want, but they are also afraid of online harassment and emotional damage because of uncontrolled exposure and virality. Therefore, the results show that celebrity is a “double-edged sword” that affects how the participants define themselves and their work aspirations and how they shape their relationship with their followers.

Conclusion

This article contributes to the current scholarship on social media content creators by focusing on the specificities of digital cultural communicators and their tensions with online celebrities, cultural capital, audience relationships, and the emotional and relational labor that this type of work entails. These online creators specialize in artistic, political, or cultural content and use their online profiles with the aspiration and goal of migrating to other sectors and offline fields, such as legacy media or book publishing. This aspiration places them in tension with their own identities as content creators and with the concept of celebrity. In particular, we have identified a distinct tension between their status as

(future) celebrities and the need to claim symbolic and cultural capital to become legitimized cultural workers. Here, achieving the status of a social media celebrity is viewed as a threat to their aspirational status within the field of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993). They aspire to become legitimate cultural producers (publishing books and essays and giving lectures and talks) thanks to the celebrity capital that their social media trajectory accrues. However, social media is also (and being labeled a "YouTuber," "Influencer," or even a "social media content creator") considered a threat to accruing cultural capital and legitimacy. These tensions result from the different (and conflicting) positions that these two subfields of cultural production occupy within the overarching cultural field. Similarly, being perceived as *wanting* to become a celebrity or accrue economic capital is viewed as at odds with the principle of disinterestedness that pervades the cultural field.

The results also show how these views about celebrities shape how they define their followers and their relations with them. They consider themselves "niche celebrities" and frame their audiences as "niches," closer to the field of "restricted cultural production," and present them as educated individuals who share interests with them. They divide their followers into two categories: those they consider part of a close community of friends and peers (because they share interests and provide mutual emotional support), and "outsiders," who threaten to disrupt their community with negative comments.

The participants are often exposed to online hate, particularly the creators who identify as women or non-binary and deal with political topics or feminist content. This hate is viewed as a negative consequence of their visibility. Hate often comes after a video goes viral, and visibility thus comes with contradictory outputs: more celebrity and revenue, but also intense hate. This hate is always perceived as coming from outsiders, as opposed to the close communities they nurture, which are safe spaces for both them and their followers.

Even though they have positive connections with their followers, they also feel the toll of exposing themselves and the obligation to be visible. However, in some cases, they are aware that fostering relationships with their audiences is required to gain visibility on platforms and even economic revenues. The results show that performing emotional labor also has to do with taking care of their mental health. Mental health was especially mentioned by the participants when discussing hate and online harassment and managing view counts and follower statistics. In this sense, although they dislike many of the platforms' demands and the toll they take on their mental health, they see them as inherently tied to their being content creators and cannot imagine any other alternatives or possibilities. To handle these demands, the respondents allude to the need to work on themselves (e.g., going to therapy) or forge relationships of reciprocal care with their community by creating safe spaces for them and their followers and considering their communities' emotional supporters. Therefore, "reciprocal care" (with their audiences) functions as a form of relational labor (Baym, 2018) for the participants. This allows them to distance their practices from purely utilitarian relations (Bonifacio et al., 2021) between them and their followers. By emphasizing that their audiences are "different" (meaning educated individuals) and highlighting the relationship of mutual care, digital cultural communicators reinforce their dissimilarities from other well-known social media content creators (e.g., influencers, streamers, etc.), whom they believe aspire to or have massive audiences and impersonal, utilitarian relationships with their audiences. Digital cultural communicators legitimize themselves by highlighting the close bonds they claim to establish with their followers based on caring,

common cultural interests, and mutual learning, which are more typical of niche audiences linked to cultural and social prestige than mass audiences linked to commodification and triviality. Since the concept of fans is linked to the negative views of mindless and obsessive audiences who relate overenthusiastically to popular media (Jenkins, 1992), digital cultural communicators avoid framing their audiences as fans. At the same time, digital cultural communicators use the same strategies to relate to and engage with their audiences as other types of content creators do. This points to a more nuanced approach to understanding the specific ways in which celebrity and fan relationships are articulated for digital cultural communicators, heavily determined by their concerns about cultural legitimacy.

In conclusion, this research sheds light on a specific kind of content creator, "digital cultural communicators," and their views on their online practices. However, we encourage further research to continue to address these types of content creators, for instance, by exploring how they shape their understanding of the algorithmic culture, the strategies of cooperation or competition, their work on diverse media platforms (cross-media work), and their future aspirations and labor projections.

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