Economics of Educational Content Creators on Social Media

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In current social media production, several revenue models have been proposed by platforms to reward online creators for their work. However, they are designed to meet the needs of only some types of creators: those who achieve very high popularity or those involved in influencer marketing strategies. In this research, we will illustrate how certain online creators who have developed a more educational and cultural editorial line try to adapt the revenue models proposed by the platforms to sustainably and profitably manage their activities. Through 40 semistructured interviews with creators who can be defined as "educational" in the Italian landscape, we analyze how they develop their own economic strategies, both by using tools proposed by the platforms and by establishing relationships with offline cultural institutions and physical markets.

Keywords: influencer industry, cultural industry, platform economy, educational creators, social media

Cultural production practices have undergone radical changes in the last two decades because of the emergence of user-generated content platforms, the weakening of twentieth-century models of cultural mediation, and radical shifts in distribution practices. Analyses in recent years have highlighted the potential for autonomy, creativity, and inclusivity of digital content creators, as well as their constraints because of being embedded in platforms that direct, shape, and limit the scope of cultural expression. In particular, several studies have highlighted the growing factors of discomfort and stress experienced by creators as a result of having to submit to the logics of platformization (Gillespie, 2010) that demarcate and normalize cultural production practices, relationships with audiences, and forms of income and success. The economics of online content production have undergone several changes over the years because of the diversification of the revenue models proposed by platforms and to changes in the practices of the creators themselves, who use, adapt, and, in some cases, revise the business models proposed by platforms (Burns, 2021).

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Although some studies have identified the dominant business approaches of the most popular influencers, such as fashion, travel, or food influencers (Hund, 2023; Poell, Nieborg, & Duffy, 2021), the compensation model is less clear for creators who may be less dependent on product placement, sponsorship, or advertising revenue, such as cultural and educational creators. In this context, we illustrate how online creators who build educational and cultural editorial lines adapt the business models proposed by the platforms to sustainably and profitably manage their content production.

Through 40 semistructured interviews with creators defined as "educational," it has been possible to analyze how they elaborate their own economic strategies through platform tools and business opportunities, different assets in media outlets, and, finally, offline cultural institutions and physical markets. The questions underpinning this research are as follows:

RQ1:   *What are the most common and successful business models for cultural and educational social media creators?*

RQ2:   *How do these types of creators use platform revenue models, and how do they transform and adapt them to their specific context?*

Literature Review

As Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) pointed out, the 2000s witnessed a rapid shift from a "link economy" to a "like economy," where the author no longer decided what was relevant. The audience who decided what content stood out with their likes and shares.

In recent years, a large body of academic literature has accumulated on the evolution of this process, highlighting different positions. In the first phase, user-generated production generated great enthusiasm, linked to the possibility of democratizing the cultural production process. Scholars hypothesized that digital media may have an inherent egalitarian potential in their ability to foster a sharing economy, allowing many people to emerge and flourish in their capacity for self-expression (Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Lessig, 2008) and political empowerment (Castells, 2013). Thus, many studies have highlighted the symbolic motivations associated with producing online content, such as the possibility of having spaces for self-expression, acting in networked public, and acquiring social capital and brand reputation (Jenkins, 2006).

However, while in the early days of the participatory web, optimism prompted the idea that one could create and produce on social media simply by following one's passions, over time, it became clear that content production was subject to stresses, expectations, and pressures that made it increasingly like a job (Duffy, 2017; Duffy & Wissinger, 2017).

At the level of studies dedicated to production, scholars focus on the power relations between platforms and content producers. According to authors such as Fisher (2012), Fuchs (2015), Terranova (2004), and van Dijck (2009), these relations are unbalanced in favor of platforms. While only a few creators receive income from platforms, most users provide free labor that is useful for the platforms' business model.

Partly in response to the growing discomfort associated with creators' efforts to remain productive and meet the ever-increasing expectations of their audiences, platforms have provided creators with direct and material forms of reward. Different revenue models have emerged over time: ads, platform payments, sponsorships, tips, and subscriptions.

The first channel of monetization comes from the revenue that platforms provide to creators once their content reaches a certain threshold of attention and is supplemented with advertising. In this direction, the YouTube Partner Program (YPP) represents the main model: Creators who are eligible to join the program, with a minimum threshold of 1,000 channel subscribers and duration/number of views, can earn directly from the platform through ad placements (Sweney, 2007).

In addition to monetizing ads, some social networks have offered direct forms of reward to their top-performing creators. On YouTube, a portion of the funds generated by premium subscriptions are allocated to the most successful creators. In 2021, TikTok moved in a similar direction, activating the TikTok Creator Fund, where platform revenue was shared with users who were most successful in engaging their audience, reaching at least 10,000 followers and 100,000 views in the last 30 days (TikTok, 2021).

Although platform monetization has long been identified as the primary business model for creators, it plays a marginal role in their business. In fact, only a few creators can reach large enough audiences to make significant profits through this revenue channel (Cunningham, Craig, & Silver, 2016).

An alternative revenue channel for creators, especially on Instagram, is sponsorship. Indeed, influencers are able to create a more engaging, direct, and targeted promotional dynamic than the classic marketing channels used by companies. Their power and effectiveness are linked to forms of emotional and relational labor (Baym, 2018; Craig & Cunningham, 2019; Duffy, 2015), requiring creators to manage themselves as a carefully crafted and managerially organized product that accompanies and, in some cases, complements the positioning of online messages (Raun, 2018).

The centrality of influencers in the lives of people is also supported by research on purchasing decisions: 46% of Italian consumers following at least one influencer bought products or services promoted by an influencer in 2023 (Majidi, 2024).

Unlike platform-based advertising, sponsorships allow creators to decide what to promote and autonomously build relationships with companies. Given the importance and impact of influencer marketing, the attention economy (Davenport & Beck, 2001) is increasingly structured through forms of intermediation between creators and platforms: In just a few years, thousands of multichannel networks—global companies that manage the relationship between creators and companies—have flourished (Cunningham et al., 2016). Their role not only has an economic impact but also a cultural one. Indeed, such agencies advise and guide creators so that their images and messages align with the needs of their target audiences and with the vision of sponsorship companies (Bishop, 2021).

The same platforms provide creators seeking to incentivize production quantitatively and qualitatively with guidelines, tips, and tutorials on how to create effective content to maintain a high supply of content for their users.

Even though the network of support for content production has increased significantly in recent years, many people do not have access to these new forms of creativity because they lack the technological, social, and cultural tools to participate in them. In addition to the threshold of access that creates a "participation divide" (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008), other inequalities related to the creator's gender, ethnicity, and geographical origin can be superimposed (Geyser, 2022). Finally, these business models, which focus on the key issues of quantity and continuity of production in the quest for continuous audience attention and virality, entail that creators have to undergo a very high pace of production, sacrificing the investment of time for creativity and editorial care in production, an issue that generates alienation for many influencers (Siciliano, 2023). Criticism and protests are thus emerging from creators who experience a progressive loss of power and control over their cultural practices because of the increasing interference of algorithmic processes that subject their work to opaque and uncontrollable dynamics. An example is the movement and online petition "Make Instagram Instagram Again" (Bruening, 2022), in which hundreds of influencers called on Instagram to move away from imitating TikTok and instead restore visibility logics based on follower retention.

Building on this dissatisfaction, new features in existing social media platforms have emerged in recent years, offering different economic approaches to online content production. In addition to direct monetization through banners, ads, platform rewards, and corporate sponsorships, platforms have proposed complementary revenue solutions. On Instagram, for example, direct sales of products through Instagram Shops and Marketplaces have been introduced. Furthermore, the affiliate approach, where people place trackable links and receive a percentage on products sold through them, has been introduced.

Revenue models based on the contribution of followers have also gradually emerged. A key example is the tip model, first introduced by Twitch and later adopted by Facebook through stars (Fischer & King, 2021), by Instagram through badges (Perez, 2020), by YouTube through applauses (Binder, 2021) and super chats (Feldman, 2017), and by TikTok through tips and video gifts (Perez, 2021). Finally, we have the subscription model, a solution adopted by several outlet media platforms (e.g., The Times, Netflix, Spotify) and user-generated content platforms, such as Twitch (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019), Patreon, Substack, and Onlyfans (Bonifacio, Hair, & Wohn, 2021; Sanyoura & Anderson, 2022).

These different approaches seek to provide creators with greater opportunities to manage content production according to diversified rules that are decoupled from the immediate possibility of popularity and are, in some ways, more autonomous than the logics of views, likes, and algorithmic virality (Fischer, 2021; Yurieff, 2021). Through patronage, for example, creators can build a loyal user base. This relationship of trust, protected by a certain contractual continuity, is thus aimed at allowing them to manage their content with greater peace of mind and independence and to plan editorial strategies that rely more on their personal taste and less on what is real-time "trending" real time or pushed algorithmically into the feeds.

This concept underpinned Patreon's communication and promotion strategy, which, from the outset, aimed to position itself as an "alternative" social media platform. Its goal was to restore agency to creators, enabling them to establish their own models of originality and autonomy through direct relationships with their audiences (Hair, Bonifacio, & Wohn, 2022). Establishing a more varied system of business models should also support a diverse and well-articulated content ecosystem. This system would include both "commercial" offerings that align with popular tastes and algorithmic trends and content with less immediate appeal that could

attract smaller but more loyal audiences over time. If the advertising model, based on engagement and visualizations, tends to favor content related to entertainment and easy enjoyment, and the model based on sponsorship concerns only certain categories of creators who are dedicated to fashion and lifestyle, other types of creators who intend to devote themselves to content for cultural, educational, and social promotion would be invited to articulate hybrid forms of income that can modulate according to content, commercial, and cultural alliances. This research thoroughly explores how these creators navigate the evolving landscape of the cultural industry to establish their unique vision of content production and the associated business models.

Methods

Starting from the framework outlined above, this contribution aims to provide further insights by looking at a specific group of influencers, namely educational and cultural content creators.

The research was conducted through 40 semistructured interviews, with an average duration of 40 minutes, covering a range of topics, including how the creators started this type of practice, the relationship between it and any of their other professional activities, the characteristics that, in their opinion, determine the success of cultural and educational content on social media, the limitations, the business models, and, finally, their relationship with the platforms. At the ethical level, the protocol included an explanation of the objectives and uses of the research via e-mail. Out of the 92 creators contacted, 40 responded to the e-mail reminders and agreed to be interviewed. At the beginning of the interviews, verbal consent was obtained from the respondents to record and use the information obtained from the interviews. In the verbal information, it was guaranteed that all content would be anonymized and that the processing would protect the identity of each respondent. The video interviews were recorded and then transcribed using AssemblyAI, an AI audio-to-text tool. Each interview was then reviewed and further processed to distinguish between the different voices in the field.

The sample of 40 creators crossed two criteria: the cultural content covered and the creator's popularity across different social channels. Creators are categorized according to different subject areas, from the most popular to the most niche: beauty, family, fashion, fitness, food, travel, green do-it-yourself tutorials, and educational influencers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Educational or cultural creators generally include all actors who share content on social media that, in some way, educates or enables the acquisition of new skills (Quintana & De León, 2021). In defining and delimiting these types of actors, we were guided by categorization in previous research (Taddeo, 2023), which identified four macrocategories of cultural and educational content on social media:

- Social activism and citizenship
- Social-emotional skills
- Educational, current affairs, and general cultural content
- Tutorials

Based on this categorization, the sample of creators was thus composed as follows:

- 8 creators (20%) deal with social issues such as human rights, environmental sustainability, citizenship, multiculturalism, and tolerance.
- 5 creators (12.5%) deal with social-emotional skills, self-help, and body positivity.

- 6 creators (15%) mainly produce tutorials in the fields of crafts, agriculture, gardening, and technology.
- 21 creators (52.5%) share content on general culture, current events, scientific subjects (e.g., chemistry, physics, astronomy), foreign languages and cultures (e.g., English, Chinese, Greek, Italian), history, philosophy, and art or literature.

About the criterion related to audience breadth, Campbell & Farrell (2020) divide influencers into five categories:

- *celebrity influencers* have more than 1 million followers mainly because of their fame outside of social media, for example, as stars in show business, sports, etc.
- *mega-influencers* have more than 1 million followers through social media fame.
- *macro-influencers* have between 100,000 and 1 million followers.
- *micro-influencers* have between 10,000 and 100,000 followers.
- *nano-influencers* have up to 10,000 followers.

According to the above classification, the research sample was composed as follows: 5% mega-influencers, 45% macro-influencers, 40% micro-influencers, and 10% nano-influencers. A summary of all respondents by topic and audience size is provided in the Appendix.[2]

In terms of analysis, the interviews were analyzed using NVivo software. Each interview was coded by assigning a case to the materials related to each influencer (interview, significant articles or posts on the research topic, data on their products, books, and events) and a "node" to each topic covered: influencer's beginnings, creative process, characteristics of successful educational content, interaction with followers, business model, platform limitations, and work-life balance. The analysis of the materials followed a bottom-up approach, typical of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in which the two authors gradually refined their categories and interpretations through processes of comparison, generalization, and reference to literature on the subject.

The following section presents the results of the analysis, with specific reference to the business models adopted by creators and their assessments of the sustainability of cultural production on social media.

Results

The initial interview findings showed that for some creators, content creation was not a source of real income at all. First, because of the negligible amounts of money that came from monetization:

> It seemed like a possible way to go, seeing a little bit of the history of Norma's teaching. Actually, Youtube is better for real monetization, but I don't have time to manage all that. . . TikTok has a fund called "Creator Fund," which is funny . . . because in 3 years they deposited in my (fund) 30 euros, so a lens of 10 euros a year . . . (Male creator 1. Topic: educational content)

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[2] https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ZWwp-D6jlt_fWM-mE913GRpgEyAPSysX/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=112609690880557593290&rtpof=true&sd=true

The second is because of the inability to devote more time than they already do to content creation, thus resulting in turning down requests for collaboration from brands; this was the case, for example, for some respondents who already had full-time jobs and considered online activities an extrasource of income.

> I don't have that need because fortunately the school gives me a living anyway, I still manage to scrape something together: the last few years 2 to 3 thousand euros a year and I basically rework, so I buy products. Then I have a better quality phone, I bought all the lighting equipment, so every year I invest them. (Male creator 2. Topic: educational content)

Among those who sought to sustain their businesses economically, there was no single revenue model. Each person had to create his or her own formula for productive sustainability by selecting, adapting, and reinterpreting different approaches. In fact, in each case, it was possible to trace different revenue sources—relative to the characteristics of the creators—to the local context in which they operated and to the theme and cultural niche they addressed.

> For example:

> A small part is YouTube revenue with monetization, so with ads on videos, but that is really the small part; then there are collaborations with companies, so videos that are sponsored by companies either because I use one of their tools or I use one of their products. And that depends because then everybody makes their own prices, there is no fixed price, I have my own prices. And then we also sell our training package. By doing all these things you are able to earn something. (Female creator 5. Topic: tutorial)

Emphasizing the need for cultural creators to work on multiple assets by mixing and diversifying many business approaches, their testimonies allowed us to identify several revenue models that characterize each of them. In the following section, we describe each of them in more detail.

Platform Monetization

As seen above, monetization through platforms is a potential source of revenue for content creators. However, the need to combine different sources of income stems mainly from the fact that despite the common perception that social media pays a lot for views, the respondents expressed that revenues from platforms were negligible or at least unprofitable compared with the amount of time they invested in creating their content. In fact, the respondents all agreed that it was difficult, if not impossible, for them who were cultural creators to make platform monetization their sole source of income:

> As . . . actually sustainability does not come from social networks. The one that pays the most, to be really clear, is Facebook, it pays almost as much as YouTube, we are at 80 cents per 1,000 views . . . Instagram, if it pays, I still have to figure out how. TikTok pays, but we are at ridiculous numbers. But just the business model is outside the social. (Male creator 22. Topic: social activism)

The results seem to confirm this and previous studies highlighting the proven difficulty for content producers to generate sufficient monetization from views on platforms (Poell et al., 2021).

In fact, many emphasize the need to invest in alternative sources of income, such as sponsorships, because time spent creating content and interacting with followers would be time taken away from work that would generate cash income:

> I think a part that maybe people don't understand a lot about this work is the fact that the platforms don't pay you. So everything you do on the platform is free, all the hours I spend looking for content, creating content, responding to posts, for me it's like I'm not working, all the income comes from the extra projects . . . from Instagram, you make money, but relatively, unless you do the sponsorships or things like that. TikTok is a ridiculous thing, it gives like 15 cents for a video, you don't live there. (Male creator 30. Topic: educational content)

Cultural Collaborations

An interesting business model mentioned by the interviewees was collaboration with museums, foundations, and cultural organizations. Several creators who are mainly involved in arts and science popularization state that they have developed collaborations with cultural institutions in the form of special events, workshops, guided tours, cultural curation, dedicated products, and so on. However, this kind of organic collaboration, in which creators are involved in a creative role and recognized authorship, is quite rare. Thus, the institutions most open to deep forms of collaboration include schools, which are starting to organize projects involving educational influencers as co-designers. Other types of institutions (e.g., museums, municipalities), according to the creators, propose forms of interaction often reduced to simple invitations as guests and promoters of events or venues.

Events

An important source of income for these creators is participation in related events, such as fairs, exhibitions, concerts, theater performances, and conventions, as well as other nonprofit or social events, such as *TED talks* on specific topics in which the content creator is an expert or spokesperson. In contrast with the cultural collaborations described above, the influencer is mainly requested as a promotional cue, both to attract people to the event and, ultimately, to gain visibility through the social media pages: "They contact me, maybe cultural organizations and museums, they ask me, 'Come, we are opening the new exhibition. Could you make us a video?' and I make the offer and prepare the video ad hoc . . ." (Male creator 12. Topic: social activism).

Different "services" can have different costs. For example, macro-influencers can charge thousands of euros to participate in an event without promoting it on their personal social media channels (in this case, the event can only be promoted on the institution's social media pages), and even double that amount if the institution requests they transform their participation into posts and reels that are also published on the creator's pages.

However, the landscape is very diverse and variable. While macro-influencers say that they are paid handsomely to attend events, others with smaller follower bases point out that cultural institutions

often expect the influencer to participate in their initiatives for free in exchange for an invitation with free admission and the potential visibility and prestige that the institution can offer.

The struggle for economic recognition of one's cultural role was a recurrent theme in the creators' testimonies, although several of them also told us about their free participation in events organized by charities or schools, underscoring their willingness to support specific causes or targets, such as combating climate change or helping young people consciously use social media.

> And then there are events, some things maybe trainings, although they are often free things, . . . but the things that you agree to do for free are things that have to do with nonprofits, NGOs and all that aspect there, or often trainings in schools. (Female creator 2. Topic: social activism)

In this direction, the results show that these types of creators seem to adhere to the idea of contributing to the cultural landscape for their own expressive and participatory pleasure (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017), seeking an ethical economy where value is related to self-realization and social impact rather than monetary accumulation (Arvidsson & Peitersen, 2013).

Sale of Own Products and Services

Another emerging business model mentioned by cultural creators is linked to the sale of products or services. In these cases, creators often state that they articulate their production by mixing educational and popular content related to the themes of their niche with marketing messages aimed at selling specific assets created by them that complement their cultural offerings. Two lines of business can be identified within this group: sale of products such as self-published books, merchandise, gadgets and other items and sale of services such as consulting and online or face-to-face courses: "I got to know the world of info-business and then selling online courses and I liked it as a way of working. I need my channels to attract students and offer my courses. . ." (Female creator 7. Topic: educational content).

Creators with larger audiences also have the entrepreneurial and organizational capacity to organize and sell performances and cultural events directly to their audiences without the support of traditional cultural institutions:

> Then I actually have several active outreach projects, among other things, with shows that I do myself, lectures on astronomy between history, psychology and science . . . I combine a little bit different multidisciplinary aspects, where there is the entertainment part and the science part, they are basically science-themed theater skits. . . (Non-binary creator 11. Topic: educational content)

Some creators have founded their own schools, both physical and online: physical infrastructures that compete with traditional institutions:

> I'm not an English teacher. I manage the social media sites to catch the attention on the topic, create a community and build loyalty. Then I founded a school where I hired real professional English teachers to actually run the core courses. (Female creator 36. Topic: educational content)

Personal Branding

In the personal branding business model, there are content creators who do not directly monetize their online production but use social media as a springboard for future projects, including work. Here, their online presence and success are instrumental to acquiring an audience base that can support and guide them in creating an often more traditional business in the future. For example, editorial productions related to the topic covered on social profiles:

> I'm not interested in being an "influencer" (which I hate as a word), I don't care if they send me products or give me something. . . because for me, the blog and social are just spaces to write articles—I've been writing articles for magazines for 3 years now—so I really care about keeping something written. Because the goal is that in the future I would like to write my own book. (Female creator 4. Topic: tutorial)

Others have expressed the intention to open a business that combines online activities with daily projects outside of social media:

> My goal is to create a loyal clientele, a loyal audience that trusts me, because my ultimate goal is to open a tourist farm. In consequence, I am starting with these pages to create a user base of enthusiasts, and then going to give them also an experiential and educational proposal to add to their touristic experience . . . (Male creator 6. Topic: tutorial)

Also included in this category are those who use social media to demonstrate their skills and expertise in their field; in this case, the content they create is not intended to attract new followers, but rather to highlight their talents to other professionals and demonstrate their ability to keep up with the market: "the social media also become a kind of business card, if you will, to open us up to external projects and other initiatives; it also serves a bit to make professional contacts, for example." (Female creator 15. Topic: educational content).

The use of social media as a self-branding tool has long been analyzed in scientific studies (Abidin, 2016; Carter, 2016; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Some analyses highlight how self-branding can have a commercial objective mainly directed toward customers, or a symbolic and status-acquiring objective directed toward other entrepreneurs from whom one wishes to gain prestige and recognition (Olanrewaju, Hossain, Whiteside, & Mercieca, 2020). Here, the creators involved are more interested in establishing commercial relationships with potential clients, although in some cases, there is no shortage of productions aimed at "positioning" themselves to other professionals and creating real comparisons and long-distance dialogues aimed at distinguishing themselves and claiming their own.

Editorial Productions

One of the most recurring business models we found in the interviews was editorial production: 45% of the cultural creators surveyed had published at least one book focused on the topics covered in their social media profiles. Some had made editorial production their primary business model, and others had combined it with other forms of economic return. In this way, the influencers and publishing industries become increasingly intertwined, confirming the growing importance of content creators in today's cultural landscape:

> My business model is ultimately to make books, nobody pays me for videos. And the fact that I don't do commercial collaborations, obviously that's part of it, it's important because you create a bond of trust and somehow people feel I'm more genuine. (Male creator 7. Topic: educational content)

> I started to monetize a couple of years ago, before obviously I didn't. In all social media you can eventually monetize, you have to propose a product to sell, basically. I chose the way of books and I make it my core business. (Male creator 8. Topic: tutorial)

The link between creators and publishing seems to be a growing trend in the social media industry. This is demonstrated by studies on booktubers (Tomasena, 2019), who position themselves as "promoters" of other people's books, or even studies on social writing communities, such as Wattpad, which have shown the ability of creators to gain editorial power and relevance from bottom-up publications on social reading platforms (Parnell, 2021; Taddeo, 2019). What is emerging here, however, is a new phenomenon in which creators are the protagonists of original editorial productions positioned directly within the industry's mainstream. In these cases, social media production is aimed not only at achieving economic capital but also at reaching the cultural and social status necessary to legitimize the creator within the mainstream cultural industry (Miège, 2019).

Non-profit

The non-profit business model includes content creators who have deliberately chosen not to make money from their social media activities. Here, the respondents explained their choices with social and personal motivations. Some did not want to make a personal profit, but still used this visibility to activate fundraisers or promote social causes online:

> I happened to do a sponsorship and of course I decided to donate the whole fee, also because the first issue is really about credibility, because obviously this site has grown because I talk about certain issues, about supporting people, so it seems obvious to me. Then I also managed to do some pretty substantial fundraising, we're talking about 4,000 euros in a few hours, because you can mobilize people when you need to. (Female creator 17. Topic: social activism)

Others had chosen to do this out of passion to maintain the possibility of saying and doing what they thought without external conditioning. In fact, by not accepting sponsorships, they felt free to plan their own content, not bound by the formats and themes proposed by brands and platforms.

> Personally, I'm learning, and I'm not going to turn my site into a tool to make money, because that doesn't really fit with my ideals. There is no business model here. The goal is always to create value, to influence as many people as possible to work towards a better and more open society . . . (Male creator 25. Topic: educational content)

Sponsorship

Finally, in cultural production, there is the sponsorship-based business model, where brands and companies need the skills of content creators to promote their products or services. Interviews have shown that sponsorship is the primary source of income for cultural influencers who turn their online profiles into full-time jobs.

> You live and can live decently, even though I accept maybe 20–30% of the collaborations. I have been lucky to find the brands and companies that can afford what I ask for. Luckily for me it's okay, I've been making a decent turnover this year. (Female creator 12. Topic: social activism)

Some creators, then, pointed out the stark differences between a salaried job and a self-employed one online, affirming that with the right numbers and content, one can make social media activity a full-fledged job.

> Yes, I say it's a job because my only income comes from Instagram through sponsored. I prefer to get money from brands because, I mean, they have it . . . let them spend it! However, it happens that I might earn very little for 2 months and then the next month I can even earn 6–8 thousand because all the brands have to spend the money from the marketing department . . . I've also tried to work as an employee, but after two weeks I wanted to shoot myself, because for me it's terrible this thing, that one month of working as an employee is like an (Instagram) Reel for me . . . (Female creator 22. Topic: educational content)

Many such content creators say they rely on influencer marketing agencies to act as intermediaries with brands, allowing them to spend more time creating quality content.

> Once I reached 10,000 followers, I realized it could be a job; now I'm in a management agency because all the bureaucratic work of contacting the client and so on is done by them . . . I earn 80 percent from collaborations on Instagram, so from posts, stories, content that companies ask me to do for them on my profile. (Female creator 14. Topic: social activism)

In any case, the interviews showed that almost all content creators agreed that collaborations and sponsorships should be in line with their "character" and the values they wanted to convey to their followers, even if this meant rejecting some partnerships, as shown below.

> All collaborations on the monetary level have to meet standards that are educational and ethical. We really avoid collaborating with realities that might be greenwashing or pinkwashing. Because when you are among the "known" online, you have a certain responsibility. (Male creator 7. Topic: educational content)

Sponsorship has become the mainstay of the creator economy, as several studies have shown (Hund, 2023). However, with cultural production, cultural creators are not always able to combine the thematic field of their interests (e.g., art, grammar, astronomy, or civil rights) with product placement and brand association. The use of sponsorship therefore appears to be much more limited for this type of creators than for other categories that deal more generally with lifestyle, fashion, or games.

Conclusion

Considering a typology of creators dedicated to educational content, this study examined formalized strategies for making this type of activity sustainable and, in some cases, an economic resource in working life. The following table summarizes the characteristics of each of the identified models, highlighting how they work and where the creators' income comes from (Table 1).

Table 1. The Main Business Models Described by the Cultural Creators.

Model of revenue	Description	Source of income
Personal branding	Visibility and promotion for the acquisition of social and cultural capital, useful for reaching contacts and clients for one's own profession and to benchmark themselves with respect to the competitors	Nobody
Non-profit work	Visibility and promotion of fundraising activities for NGOs	Nobody
Cultural collaborations	Training and creation of specific content in partnership with cultural institutions (e.g., guided tours, art reviews, courses and workshops)	Cultural institutions and/or companies
Participation in events	Income from on-site event participation	Cultural institutions and/or companies
Sponsorships	Revenue from promoting products or services on their own social media pages	Cultural institutions and/or companies
Platform monetization	Payments from platforms, based on engagement thresholds	Platforms
Selling their own products, events and services	Marketing and sale of the creator's products, services and merchandise	Audiences
Editorial productions	Royalties on books sold	Audiences, publishers

First, the majority of the creators stated that they did not engage in producing cultural content online for profit, but because it satisfied their needs for expression and civic participation and, in some cases, helped them to "pass the time" during periods of enforced static, such as the pandemic period.

Although this non-profit imprint is the majority in our sample, it is clear that almost all creators have gradually developed their own strategies to make online content production both emotionally rewarding and personally sustainable.

We can draw an ideal scale of "profit interest" in the sample interviewed, from cultural creators who reject any kind of collaboration or interaction involving personal financial compensation to creators who have clear business models aimed at sponsoring other people's products or creating their own marketplace, using cultural-type user-generated content as a more effective promotional tool to retain consumers, as opposed to producing purely commercial content. In this sense, cultural creators can also be seen as skillful anticipators of consumer and entertainment trends. Indeed, they anticipate the emergence of new needs and a growing interest in forms of "learning on demand" and up-skilling options on social media (e.g., nanodegrees, micro-credentials, paid Web-based tutors, and free online educational videos) (Meta, 2021).

Between these two opposing approaches, we find various fluid solutions based on interactions with the offline world and building relationships with different actors in the contemporary cultural industry. There are creators who, through their production, are able to gain visibility, authority, and esteem in a particular cultural sector, such as the visual arts, and thus build partnerships with museums, educational institutions, and event organizers. These creators want to maintain their own creative autonomy and run their sites primarily for pleasure and self-expression. They do not believe that their activities could lead them to a substantial and stable form of remuneration, but they see interactions with cultural institutions as virtuous collaborations that can enrich and provide opportunities for their communities in particular. Other forms of income are related to editorial production. Many of the interviewees said that they had received editorial proposals from publishers, often prominent ones, to transform their paths, teachings, or cultural insights into a traditional cultural format, such as a book.

The analysis thus shows that while trying not to conform to the logics of taste and success imposed by the platforms, cultural creators are looking for alternative forms of reward and sustainability. As they develop their social media models and spread their content across multiple platforms (Craig & Cunningham, 2019; Scolere, 2019; Sutherland, Jarrahi, Dunn, & Nelson, 2020), these creators gain support from mainstream cultural entities like galleries, museums, publishers, and educational institutions, which see them as opportunities to refresh audience engagement and explore new marketing strategies. As the analysis has shown (Table 1), the majority of business models identified by creators find their main source of economic support in cultural organizations and institutions, rather than in platforms. An alliance between creators and cultural institutions seems to be emerging as a form of resistance to the popularity logics of social media and as an attempt toward the "deplatformization" of cultural production online.

Finally, it should be noted that the patronage model through audience contributions is not currently considered attractive, as none of the interviewees claimed to receive significant compensation from subscription platforms such as Patreon or tip systems embedded in other social media channels. When

creators decide to rely on audiences as direct channels of remuneration, they seek to develop goods and services that can be sold directly in the physical marketplace and outside the monetization systems of platforms. Interesting in this sense is the emergence of a proposal by these actors of their own cultural goods and services, branded by their social media image: books, diaries, and educational tools, eco-friendly products, courses and tutorials, events, and tourist packages. The prominent role and popularity of these creators within the social media cultural industry allows them, over time, to acquire the space and the cultural capital (Villegas-Simón, Anglada-Pujol, Lloveras, & Oliva, 2023) to also insert themselves as autonomous actors in the traditional cultural industry.

Whether the approaches of online cultural creators can find their own success depend on various factors, some of which were outlined by the interviewees. The first is the ability and opportunity to manage the timing and manner of their production while somehow resisting the logic of metrics and likes. Indeed, the temptation to adapt one's content, style, and originality to the logic of social media engagement is always present, and the specter of popularity corrodes and unsettles even the most "pure" actors at the level of commercial purposes. In this respect, many creators have highlighted the (often frustrating) attempt to adapt cultural content, often complex and requiring argumentation, to the short formats demanded by the metrics of social media.

A second lever of success lies in the hands of the cultural institutions themselves and their effective capacity and generosity in trying to open their model to "outsiders" who come from non-institutional and often non-accredited backgrounds, according to the "classic" paths of cultural authority. According to the creators, their ability to reach and interest audiences is often seen by traditional cultural institutions as a threat, a resource to be exploited, sometimes cynically, and in some (still minority) cases as an opportunity to confront and renew their cultural formats. In this context, companies also sponsor these types of creators; however, as some have noted, their strategies often amount to "woke washing" rather than genuine cultural support. Consequently, they are viewed with suspicion.

Finally, a third element is related to the ability of the same platforms to intercept this kind of educational need, market, and cultural trend and eventually incorporate it to their advantage. For instance, Douyin is already enabling educational creators to develop businesses related to their contributions. This includes linking the knowledge-sharing platform Xuelang to provide comprehensive services for creators and to establish an online education business (Cai, 2022). While this kind of recognition could certainly incentivize user-generated cultural production and provide social media with quality content, platform interference might become unwieldy over time. This could create a form of "platform patronage," undermining individual autonomy and creativity in favor of private and global cultural and editorial agendas. The transformations of the cultural industry related to such social media actors are, therefore, still in progress and are full of uncertainties. With this contribution, we have tried to provide some interpretative insights that allow us to assess the phenomenon from the perspective of the economics of culture and reflect on the developments and challenges of a possible pedagogical and cultural interpretation of social media production.

Although the research has led to the possibility of analyzing in detail the professionalization practices of cultural creators, several limitations should be highlighted to improve future research on this

topic. A first limitation lies in the methodological approach, namely the use of the interviews. Although this approach allowed us to reconstruct the "backstage" of creators' practices, in some cases, it did not allow us to obtain a comprehensive overview of their creative characteristics. Therefore, it would be useful to complement the information derived from the interviews with a direct analysis of the content, which would allow us to explore and compare the creators' points of view with their final outputs. Another delicate step concerns the relationship with external actors, such as cultural institutions, sponsors, platforms, and, finally, audiences. Research has outlined how these types of creators build complex economic models based on the intertwining of different revenue channels. In the current research, they are presented as quite independent economic models, but more research could be done to understand if and how they are integrated into the editorial design of such creators and possibly what criticalities and conflicts may arise for them while trying to reach and harmonize such a complex system of stakeholders.

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