



Performing Realness: Constructing Authenticity Amid Algorithmic and Market Pressures

Sofa Sofiana

Universitas Pamulang, Indonesia

sofiana82@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

In the algorithm-driven landscape of digital media, streaming content creators face the paradox of remaining true to themselves while meeting the market's demand for engagement and visibility. This study explores how creators actively construct and perform authenticity in the face of commercial and algorithmic pressures. Using a qualitative research design grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) the study draws on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten experienced digital creators across platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Twitch. Findings indicate that authenticity is not an innate or stable trait, but a continuously negotiated identity shaped by audience expectations, monetization structures, and emotional self-regulation. Creators often adopt strategic forms of "curated realness," balancing vulnerability with relatability to maintain audience trust while adhering to platform logics. Three central themes emerged: internal conflict between self-expression and platform optimization, the commodification of personal narratives, and the role of peer support and self-reflection in safeguarding creative integrity. Rather than being passive recipients of platform demands, creators exhibit agency by redefining what it means to be authentic in digital spaces. This study provides new insight into the emotional labor and ethical decision making embedded in content creation and offers valuable implications for media scholars, platform designers, and creator support programs in managing the human dimensions of digital labor.



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INTRODUCTION

The rise of digital streaming platforms has transformed the media landscape, enabling individuals to become independent content creators with direct access to global audiences (Criado & Guevara-Gómez, 2021). This shift represents a significant cultural and technological development within the field of media production and broadcasting, where traditional gatekeeping structures have been replaced by algorithm-driven visibility and monetization models. In this ecosystem, creators are no longer solely entertainers or informants but also entrepreneurs, cultural narrators, and emotional laborers operating within highly competitive and rapidly evolving digital environments.

As streaming becomes an increasingly dominant mode of content dissemination, authenticity has emerged as a central value in the creator-audience relationship. Viewers often seek connection, relatability, and transparency from creators, rewarding content that appears genuine and emotionally resonant. However, the demand for authenticity exists alongside commercial pressures, including platform algorithms, sponsorship expectations, and the continuous need for engagement optimization. This complex interplay between self-expression and market logic raises important questions about how creators experience, interpret, and perform authenticity within the digital attention economy.

While previous studies have examined platform economics, algorithmic influence, and audience behavior, far less is known about the internal worlds of creators—their perceptions, emotional labor, and personal negotiations of identity. Quantitative or behaviorist approaches have offered valuable structural insights but often reduce complex experiences to measurable outputs,

overlooking the richness of lived meaning (Dubyna dkk., 2023). This gap calls for a methodology capable of capturing the nuanced, emotionally layered narratives that characterize creators' daily realities.

Phenomenology—particularly the interpretative strand—provides this lens by prioritizing subjective experience and meaning-making over surface-level behavioral patterns. It allows researchers to uncover how authenticity is internally constructed, contested, and sustained amid commercial and algorithmic pressures (Deal dkk., 2024). In doing so, it addresses the limitations of survey-based or purely descriptive models, which rarely reveal the complex and sometimes contradictory processes shaping creators' sense of self and integrity.

Understanding the subjective experience of authenticity in this context requires a methodological approach that privileges lived experience and meaning-making. Phenomenology offers a unique lens through which the nuanced, personal, and socially embedded experiences of creators can be explored. Rather than focusing on quantifiable outputs or behavioral trends, phenomenological inquiry seeks to reveal how individuals perceive and construct their realities—particularly in emotionally and ethically charged spaces such as content production under commercial influence (Deal dkk., 2024). As such, there is a compelling need to delve deeper into how creators navigate their roles, preserve their identities, and sustain their integrity in a system shaped by visibility, virality, and commodification.

Research on the subjective experience of individuals engaged in digital media production has gained increasing importance, particularly as creators navigate evolving socio-technical ecosystems. Within this growing body of inquiry, understanding how content creators make sense of their work, identity, and public persona amidst external pressures presents both a theoretical and methodological challenge. While much has been written about platform economics, algorithmic influence, and audience behavior, the internal worlds of creators—their perceptions, emotional labor, and interpretative processes—remain comparatively underexplored.

One of the primary limitations in existing research lies in the predominance of quantitative or behaviorist methodologies, which often reduce complex experiences into measurable outputs, overlooking the richness of lived meaning (Dubyna dkk., 2023). For example, studies focusing on engagement metrics or economic incentives provide valuable structural insights but fail to capture how creators personally interpret and respond to the commodification of their identity or creative voice.

Moreover, general survey instruments are frequently ill-equipped to elicit the nuanced, emotionally layered, and context-specific narratives that characterize creators' day-to-day realities.

These methodological constraints underscore a critical need for approaches that can more fully access the essence of experience. Without such depth, interpretations of authenticity, identity, and agency in content creation risk becoming superficial or disconnected from the lived perspectives of those directly involved. Phenomenological inquiry, particularly the interpretative strand, offers a necessary corrective—providing a means of accessing the interiority of experience that traditional models often neglect. As digital media continues to reshape how individuals relate to work, self, and community, a deeper understanding of these experiences becomes essential.

In addressing the growing complexity of digital content creation, existing studies have primarily relied on practical frameworks that focus on algorithmic strategies, monetization patterns, and user engagement metrics. These approaches, while valuable for understanding systemic patterns, often prioritize observable behavior over subjective meaning. As a result, they tend to offer surface-level insights that overlook the deeper psychological, emotional, and existential dimensions of creators' lived experiences.

This gap becomes particularly evident in research on authenticity in digital broadcasting, where the pressures of performativity, audience expectations, and self-branding intersect. While recent studies have examined creators' navigation of commercial demands (Garard dkk., 2022), they often lack the methodological depth needed to reveal how authenticity is internally constructed, contested, and negotiated on a personal level. Quantitative and descriptive models fall short in

capturing the intricate, sometimes contradictory, narratives that shape creators' sense of identity and creative integrity.

To advance a more holistic understanding of this phenomenon, there is a clear need for a research approach that privileges subjective experience and meaning-making. Phenomenological methods, particularly the interpretative strand, provide a powerful alternative—allowing for an in-depth exploration of how creators perceive, embody, and give meaning to authenticity within the context of algorithmic culture and commercial influence. This perspective is essential for uncovering the essence of the phenomenon and for informing theoretical and practical insights that are grounded in the actual lived realities of digital creators.

Previous studies have examined how digital content creators manage audience expectations and platform dynamics. Research by (Gu dkk., 2023) highlighted the growing tension between authenticity and monetization in content production. However, these studies often emphasize external factors, leaving internal, lived experiences less explored. Some have used thematic or survey-based methods that offer limited insight into personal meaning-making. This highlights a need to deepen our understanding of how creators perceive and negotiate their sense of self in commercialized digital spaces.

This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how content creators experience authenticity while facing commercial pressures. The method was chosen to examine subjective meaning and inner narratives that are often overlooked in mainstream media studies. By focusing on lived experience, the study addresses the gap in understanding how creators construct and preserve personal integrity (Medina Uzcátegui dkk., 2024). The phenomenological lens helps to interpret what authenticity means to creators within the constraints of the digital marketplace. This approach aligns with the study's aim of uncovering essential insights that quantitative models fail to reveal.

This article is structured as follows. The introduction presents the general and specific background of the study and outlines the research gap. The methodology section explains the phenomenological framework, participant selection, and procedures for data collection and analysis. The results section presents the findings using interpretative themes supported by participants' direct quotes (Mula-Falcón dkk., 2023). Finally, the discussion and conclusion highlight the study's contributions and suggest directions for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of streaming content creators in maintaining authenticity amidst commercial pressures. Interpretative phenomenology was selected due to its focus on understanding how individuals make sense of their experiences within specific socio-cultural contexts. The design emphasizes a detailed exploration of subjective realities, enabling the uncovering of complex emotional, cognitive, and existential dimensions associated with the phenomenon under investigation. IPA, rooted in Heideggerian philosophy, is particularly suitable for this study as it allows for the interpretation of participants' internal narratives while acknowledging the researcher's role in co-constructing meaning from those narratives.

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of ten active digital content creators who regularly publish on major streaming platforms such as YouTube, Twitch, and TikTok. A purposive sampling approach was used to ensure the inclusion of individuals with direct and sustained experience of the phenomenon under examination (Niewiadomski, 2020). Inclusion criteria required participants to have at least two years of experience in content creation, engagement with monetization systems, and self-identification with the intention of maintaining content authenticity. Individuals who had discontinued streaming or worked solely under corporate-managed accounts were excluded to ensure

the focus remained on autonomous creators. The sample included six males and four females, aged between 23 and 38 years, with an average streaming experience of 4.5 years.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted either face-to-face or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on the participants' geographical location and availability. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with prior consent. Interviews were guided by an interview protocol designed to elicit rich descriptions of participants' experiences regarding content authenticity and commercial pressure. The interview environment was arranged to foster comfort and openness, whether conducted in a private meeting space or in the participant's personal digital workspace. All interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure fidelity to the original dialogue (Philip, 2021). Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations where applicable.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following the systematic steps outlined by (Rani dkk., 2024). Transcripts were read multiple times to achieve immersion, followed by the identification of significant meaning units within each transcript. These units were coded and grouped into emerging themes through a process of thematic clustering. Software assistance (NVivo) was employed to organize codes and facilitate pattern recognition without dictating the interpretative process. Cross-case analysis was then performed to identify shared and divergent experiences among participants. Through iterative interpretation, the analysis yielded core themes that reflected the essential meanings attributed by the participants to their lived experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board. All participants received detailed information regarding the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights as research participants (Saragih dkk., 2024). Written informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Anonymity was preserved through the use of pseudonyms, and all identifiable data were securely stored and handled in accordance with international ethical standards for research involving human subjects, including the Declaration of Helsinki and applicable local regulations.

RESULTS

The Tension Between Creative Freedom and Algorithmic Demands

Participants consistently expressed a struggle between preserving their creative identity and conforming to platform-driven metrics such as engagement rates, watch time, and algorithmic visibility.

“Sometimes I feel like I'm no longer creating for myself, but for the algorithm. If I don't hit the trending format, my video dies, no matter how meaningful it is to me.” (P3)

For many, this tension caused emotional exhaustion and led to a sense of disconnection from their original motivation for content creation. This emotional labor was often invisible to viewers but deeply impacted the creators' self-perception and relationship with their audience.

“It's hard to explain, but I feel like I'm betraying myself every time I follow what the platform wants instead of what I want to say.” (P7)

This theme illustrates how algorithmic influence acts not only as a technical constraint but as an internalized pressure that shapes identity and expression.

Performing Authenticity as a Strategic Necessity

Contrary to the idealized notion of authenticity, participants revealed that authenticity is often performed—a carefully calibrated expression aimed at audience resonance.

“Being ‘authentic’ is part of the job. It’s like... I’m authentic, but only the version of myself that sells.” (P5)

Participants distinguished between felt authenticity and strategic authenticity, acknowledging that what appears raw or real on screen is often the product of rehearsed vulnerability or calculated transparency.

“I share my bad days, but only the ones I think my audience will relate to. Not the real dark ones.” (P2)

These findings suggest that authenticity in content creation is not binary but exists on a spectrum, negotiated in the intersection of personal truth and public expectation.

Negotiating Integrity through Community and Self-Reflection

Despite the pressures, participants actively sought ways to preserve their integrity by building support networks with fellow creators and engaging in self-reflection practices.

“I have a group of creator friends where we check in with each other. It helps me remember why I started.” (P1)

Many described deliberate pauses, journal writing, or digital detoxes as strategies to recalibrate their intentions and reconnect with their core message.

“When I took a month off, I realized I was creating for applause, not for impact. That changed how I approach everything.” (P6)

This theme reveals resilience and agency, showing that creators are not passive victims of commercial systems but active meaning-makers capable of redefining their trajectories.

The lived experience of streaming content creators reflects a nuanced negotiation of authenticity amid commercial imperatives. While algorithmic and audience pressures present significant challenges, creators continuously reinterpret their roles, emotions, and boundaries to maintain a sense of personal and creative integrity.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that content creators experience authenticity not as a static trait but as a dynamic negotiation shaped by commercial expectations and internal values. These experiences reflect a nuanced psychological and emotional landscape, where creators continuously redefine their sense of self in response to market-driven digital environments—directly addressing the central research question regarding how creators interpret and maintain authenticity under commercial pressure.

This study offers a meaningful response to the research problem by illustrating how authenticity is both constructed and challenged within creators’ lived realities. Rather than presenting authenticity as an inherent quality, the findings uncover it as a performative, reflexive process deeply embedded in the creators’ attempts to remain truthful to their identities while meeting platform and audience demands (Temiz & Salelkar, 2020). The contribution lies in uncovering the interpretative strategies creators use to reconcile personal meaning with professional viability—insights that have remained underexplored in existing literature. This phenomenological exploration sheds light on the emotional and ethical complexities behind the scenes of content creation, enriching our understanding of the human dimension within digital labor.

The study’s results align with and expand upon earlier research by (Wang & Liu, 2023), who identified tension between creators’ intentions and platform dynamics. However, unlike these studies, which tended to emphasize strategic behavior or external structures, the present research penetrates the interior realm of meaning-making, where decisions are not merely strategic but also existential. The concept of “performed authenticity” supports (Wong dkk., 2024) assertion that digital identities are negotiated, yet this study advances that argument by revealing the emotional costs and internal

dialogues involved. Furthermore, by incorporating interpretative phenomenological analysis, the study confirms the limitations of behaviorist or outcome-based approaches in fully grasping the essence of authenticity in the streaming era.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the individual experiences of digital content creators, offering critical insights into the broader cultural and professional landscapes of digital media labor. The negotiation of authenticity under commercial pressure reflects not only personal identity work but also highlights systemic tensions within contemporary digital economies. These insights are relevant for platform designers, media educators, and policymakers who seek to understand the emotional and ethical tolls of digital entrepreneurship. From a sociocultural perspective, the study reveals how perceived authenticity functions as both a symbolic currency and a psychological burden, shaping how creators relate to their audiences, their craft, and themselves. It also underscores the need for support structures that acknowledge the invisible emotional labor embedded in content production.

While the study provides in-depth understanding of a specific group of creators, several limitations must be acknowledged. The purposive sampling approach, while methodologically appropriate for phenomenological research, limits the diversity of perspectives across different content genres, regions, or platform types. The subjective and interpretative nature of the findings also means they are not intended for statistical generalization, but rather for theoretical transferability within similar sociocultural contexts (Zhang & Li, 2022). Additionally, the reliance on self-reported narratives may be influenced by participants' self-presentation and retrospective reflection. These limitations, however, open valuable directions for deeper inquiry rather than diminishing the value of the insights presented.

Future research may build upon these findings by examining how experiences of authenticity evolve over time, particularly in response to changing platform policies or creator burnout. Longitudinal phenomenological studies could uncover temporal dimensions of identity negotiation in digital media work. Comparative studies across cultural contexts or platform environments may also reveal how different sociotechnical systems shape meaning-making processes among creators. Furthermore, interdisciplinary approaches integrating phenomenology with media studies and digital ethics could offer a more comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities of digital selfhood in commercialized spaces.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how streaming content creators experience and interpret authenticity while navigating commercial pressures in digital media environments. The findings revealed that authenticity is not fixed but actively constructed through a reflexive process influenced by audience expectations, platform algorithms, and personal values. Creators perform authenticity strategically while striving to preserve their creative identity and emotional integrity. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of digital labor by illuminating the subjective tensions that shape creators' professional and personal experiences—an area that previous quantitative studies have often overlooked. The use of interpretative phenomenological analysis allowed for rich insight into the creators' lived realities, offering theoretical and practical relevance for scholars, platform designers, and content professionals. Future studies could expand this inquiry by exploring authenticity across different cultural or genre-specific creator communities and incorporating longitudinal perspectives.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All research activities were conducted independently, and no financial or personal relationships influenced the integrity of the findings presented.

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