Screen Industries Growth Network

LEVELLING UP SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT CREATOR LABOUR

Lights, Camera, Policy Action!

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University of Huddersfield

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Inspiring global professionals

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Dr Errol Salamon is a senior lecturer in digital media and communication in the Department of Communication and Humanities at the University of Huddersfield. He is principal investigator of the SIGN-funded collaborative research project "Creator labour: Screen production cultures and transmedia intersectionality in Yorkshire." His research has been published in various journals, including New Media & Society, Digital Journalism, Communication Theory, and Management Communication Quarterly.

About SIGN

The Screen Industries Growth Network (SIGN) is a unique, business-facing initiative supporting the TV, film and games industries in Yorkshire and the Humber. SIGN aims to make this region the UK's centre for digital creativity, and a model of diverse and inclusive activity. In order to do this, SIGN connects companies, support agencies and universities through a programme of training, business development, research and evaluation.

SIGN is a £6.4M project, starting in Summer 2020, and funded by Research England, the University of York, and its partners. The University of York leads the initiative, working with Screen Yorkshire and eight other Yorkshire universities. An extensive network of collaboration ensures that SIGN is equipped to deliver maximum impact across the region.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UK Government's 2022 Levelling Up the United Kingdom policy agenda on geographical disparities has addressed uneven economic development and social deprivation beyond London in regions like Yorkshire. The creative industries facilitate growth and productivity that could provide more opportunities for people across the country. However, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee's 2022 report Influencer Culture: Lights, Camera, Inaction? reveals that creators struggle to build sustainable and decently-paid careers in the social media creator economy. This paper draws on a thematic analysis of policy, industry data, and interviews with 53 solo self-employed creators in Yorkshire. Creators use multiple video-sharing social media platforms, including YouTube, Twitch, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to produce, circulate, and monetise their content, while building an audience. The paper outlines levelling up policy silences and recommends action points to support regional diversity and inclusion in the creator economy in three key areas: revenue streams; professional training and networking spaces; and collective trade representation. The proposed recommendations raise implications for how public policy could support creators and a wider levelling up agenda. Support from governments and platforms could bolster digital creative industries and regional development, making it possible for more creators to establish stable and reasonably-paid careers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Solo self-employed content creators are revolutionising the traditional screen entertainment media industry business models and career pathways in the United Kingdom beyond their London centricity (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, 2021; Florida, 2022; OfCom, 2021; WP Creative Group, 2022). Leveraging digital technologies and social media platforms, individual creators now have the ability to bypass legacy gatekeepers in the film and television industries, redistributing the power from big companies.

According to one estimate, the UK alone had 16.6 million creators in 2022, representing an increase of 8 million creators since 2020 (Adobe, 2022). This transformation is part of the global phenomenon known as the creator economy, which is estimated to comprise 200 million creators worldwide (Linktree, 2022). The term "creator economy" encompasses the "broader economic and social infrastructure that enables the work of Creators" (Florida, 2022, p. 9). Video-based content dominates this internet creator landscape, accounting for more than 80% of global creator content (HypeAuditor, 2023). Prominent UK influencers like KSI, Zoella, and Joe Sugg have amassed millions of social media followers, earning millions of pounds and enjoying relative autonomy in building successful careers based on self-expression and online video entertainment. Yet influencers with at least 5,000 followers make up only a small share (17%) of all creators in the UK (Adobe, 2022).

Despite the low barriers to access the "creator middle class" (Florida, 2022; WP Creative Group, 2022), creators are facing challenges in building sustainable and decently-paid full-time careers with reliable revenue streams and affordable professional production spaces (ConvertKit, 2022; Cunningham & Craig, 2019, 2021; Duffy, 2017; Linktree, 2022; NeoReach, 2022). They feel the pressure to constantly post content while navigating a context of insecure freelance and flexible work arrangements, which was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Florida, 2022; Salamon, 2020). Additionally, the creator economy is geographically clustered in big global cities, such as London, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York, posing significant obstacles for creators trying to build their careers elsewhere. This geographic concentration further compounds the challenges creators already face.

Nevertheless, creators have faced significant challenges in effectively organising to improve their collective interests due to the fragmented and globally-dispersed nature of their work environment. One example of such struggles is the failed US-based Internet Creators Guild in 2019 (Cunningham & Craig, 2021; Niebler & Kern, 2020). A notable exception is the YouTubers Union, which creators established in Germany in 2018. Partnering with the established trade union IG Metall, the YouTubers Union advocated for a better monetisation model that would fairly compensate creators. Despite their efforts, they were unable to secure lasting agreements in their negotiations with YouTube.

The above issues about creator labour are magnified by the UK Government's wider Levelling Up the United Kingdom policy agenda, which addresses geographical disparities, uneven economic development, and social deprivation (HMG, 2022). The research indicates that Yorkshire stands out as one of the UK regions with significant gaps in access to financial capital and financial equity, along with high proportions of low-paid jobs and poor-quality housing. The Government recognises the vital role of creative industries in levelling up opportunities in regions like Yorkshire, stating, "Not only are [creative industries] sources of local pride and improved quality of life" but also "drivers of growth and productivity" (HMG, 2022, p. 167). Furthermore, the Government announced in February 2022 that it would invest £18 million of new funding in its Creative Scale Up Programme to support creative businesses outside London as part of its levelling up agenda (DDCMS et al., 2022). Additionally, the Cultural Investment Fund has supported cultural organisations across England with more than £200 million between 2019 and 2023 "to level up opportunities to access the arts," including creative facilities for digital and screen industries (DCMS, 2023b).

Conversely, recent digital policy in the UK outlines how innovations and tools from the tech sector could contribute to the country's levelling up policy. Foregrounding the significance of digital content creators in the creative industries, the Government's broader UK Digital Strategy aims to increase awareness of pathways into digital occupations (DDCMS, 2022). It also stresses that creators need to retain their intellectual property (IP) generated on digital platforms to exploit new revenue streams. Echoing these key concerns, the UK Government's Creative Industries Sector Vision includes a goal to "[b]uild a highly-skilled, productive and inclusive workforce for the future," with a high job-quality objective to ensure the workforce reflects all of the UK's population (DCMS, 2023a). These concerns are exacerbated by what the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee (HLCDC, 2023) identifies as a wider issue of "digital exclusion." According to their research, 1.7 million UK households have neither mobile nor broadband internet at home, which illuminates the impact of digital exclusion. Additionally, nearly 1 million more people have cut back or cancelled home internet services due to cost of living challenges, further contributing to the problem.

However, despite these policy initiatives, solo self-employed creators in the social media platform economy face distinct challenges beyond IP protection in music streaming. This paper will examine UK social media platform policy, company strategies, and Yorkshire creators' perceptions regarding regional diversity and inclusion in the creator labour force. By studying policy initiatives, platform programmes, and creators' varying practices, this research aims to better understand the creator economy and identify policy gaps that could support creators and foster more opportunities across the country.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper adopts a three-phase exploratory research design. First, the author and a research assistant conducted online mapping research based on keyword and hashtag searches through video-based social media platforms to help outline the structure of the creator workforce in Yorkshire (Highfield & Leaver, 2015). We collected data on transmedia social media content creators who have accounts on two or more platforms, including Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, Twitch, Pinterest, Snapchat, and/or OnlyFans.

We considered various criteria across each creator's accounts: self-presentation of identity; platforms used; uses of keywords and hashtags related to unitary authorities and local authority districts within Yorkshire; types of content produced; content creator types; dates accounts created; total videos or posts per account; number of subscribers or followers per account; and number of shares, views, or likes per account.

From this research, we identified creators based in and/or from Yorkshire (N = 312). To determine the common types of content these creators produce, we conducted a thematic analysis of creators' self-described profile bios and self-selected creator types across their social media accounts. Creators produce one or more of the following content types:

- Yorkshire life
- Food reviews
- Cooking
- Fashion
- Beauty
- Gaming
- Book, movie, or TV reviews
- Music reviews or making
- Lifestyle
- Parenting and family
- Student life and education
- Travel
- Sports
- Expat life
- Adult entertainment/sexually explicit content
- Health and fitness
- Relationships
- Pranks and comedy and/or
- Vlogging.

Second, we selected creators from this research to recruit for interviews. We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews between June and September 2022 with social media creators based in and/or from Yorkshire (N = 53) about their career pathways. We explored a wide range of topics: cross-platform online content creation; the nature of online content creator types; diversity and inclusion; Yorkshire brand identity; and creator working conditions, rights, and labour protections. Following, we did a thematic analysis based on these interviews. This research received institutional research ethics approval and interviewees gave their written informed consent. Interviewee data have been anonymised to protect participants' identities and such alterations have not distorted the scholarly meaning.

Most of our interviewees had accounts on Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and/or Twitch, and could be classified as micro-influencers (10,000-100,000 followers) or nano-influencers (1,000-10,000 followers) on at least one of their social accounts (Christison, 2022; Geyser, 2023; Gleam Solutions, 2022; HypeAuditor, 2023; OfCom, 2021). Many of them started doing content creation as a hobby, hoping to convert their hobby into long-term decently-paid careers. Others engaged in content creation as a part-time job or side hustle while doing other paid work, related or unrelated to content creation. Some interviewees produced content as a full-time job, setting up their solo entrepreneurial brands on social media platforms and/or producing content for other companies. They typically produced at least two content forms, such as short-form video, long-form video, photography, or blogging. Our data reflect trends outlined in recent survey research. For example, 65% of creators in the UK worked full time in 2022, while only 24% of creators owned or ran a business that enabled them to sell or make money from the type of original social media content they distributed online (Adobe, 2022; also see ConvertKit, 2022; NeoReach, 2022). Globally, 58% of creators produce 2-4 content forms (Linktree, 2022).

Third, we situated this research within the context of a thematic analysis of the following sources: UK policy documents and international industry reports on the creator economy following the COVID-19 pandemic, from 2021 to June 2023 (N = 18), and social media platform company documents (N = 53). We gathered

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these sources from publicly accessible government or company websites and then archived and analysed them in NVivo CAQDA. Next, we proposed action points to facilitate levelling up initiatives regarding regional diversity and inclusion in the UK's social media platform economy. Framed by Freedman's (2010) concept of "policy silence," we aimed to identify "the options that are not considered" (p. 355, emphasis in original) by bringing into dialogue policy, industry, and company documents on the creator economy, the wider creative industries, and levelling up. A policy silences approach can highlight the "exclusions, gaps, and taken-for-granted agendas that mark ongoing policy debates" (Freedman, 2010, p. 347). Based on key concerns identified in this paper, the action points proposed below could provide the basis for a larger-scale policy "action research" project that would involve taking action for the purpose of policy advocacy (Hearn et al., 2019).

3. NEW RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE

3.1 Creator Labour and the UK Social Media Platform Economy: Policy Silences

The DCMS Committee (2022a) launched the Influencer Culture inquiry in March 2021 to examine how the creator economy operates, the impact of social media influencers on UK culture, and regulatory silences regarding influencer marketing. The Committee found that content creation can be insecure and underpaid due to a lack of regulation and professional support from platforms and third-party organisations, such as trade associations and unions, which could represent creators' collective interests. To determine effective support strategies, the DCMS Committee (2022a) "recommend that the Government conducts or commissions a market review into the influencer ecosystem, covering the scope of influencing work, the composition of the community, employment challenges and revenue streams" (p. 14). It is also important for them to understand if revenue streams "are proportionate and fair" (DCMS Committee, 2022a, p. 22). The Committee's market review would consider "the various revenue streams available to influencers, including deals between influencers and third parties as well as revenue sharing mechanisms from the major social media platforms" (DCMS Committee, 2022a, p. 23). However, the Government declined to commission this review, stating, "the Committee's report already sheds light on the influencer ecosystem and effectively acts as an industry review" (DCMS Committee, 2022b, p. 3). Yet, considering the wider levelling up policy agenda discussed earlier, more research is needed on regions like Yorkshire on the scope and composition of the creator workforce, employment challenges, and an analysis of the various revenue streams across platforms. One employment challenge that still needs to be explored is the accessibility of regionally-based professional support, including creator training and networking spaces in Yorkshire.

Furthermore, the Influencer Culture report foregrounds the mediating role that collective trade representation could play in advocating for creators' rights and helping protect them, especially in brand contracts. The DCMS Committee (2022a) "recommend that the Government commission an industry partner to develop a code of conduct for influencer marketing" and "promote this code as an example of best practice for deals between influencers and brands or talent agencies" (p. 18). According to the DCMS Committee (2022a), the Influencer Marketing Code of Conduct is one example of best practice produced by the Incorporated Society of British Advertisers (ISBA), the UK trade body representing brand owners in advertising. However, a "Code of Conduct should also recognise the right to collective trade representation for influencers, such as guilds and unions, and include a commitment to work with these groups regarding relevant issues in influencer culture" like "minimum pay rates" (DCMS Committee, 2022a, p. 60). Additionally, more research is needed on creators' perceptions regarding the right to collective trade representation and the relevant professional issues beyond only brand relationships, particularly at the regional level. Gathering creators' perceptions is crucial for understanding the distinct issues of creators in regions like Yorkshire, developing effective Codes of Conduct, and advocating for their rights.

Despite the lack of regionally-segregated data on the UK creator economy, some industry research has estimated the massive impact of individual social media platforms and content creators' production on the country's economy. For example, YouTube contributed more than £1.4 billion to the UK's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2021 and its creator ecosystem supported more than 40,000 full-time equivalent jobs (Oxford Economics, 2022). The research suggests that YouTube has become "the home of creative entrepreneurs" in the UK: for 80% of creators, "YouTube provides an opportunity to create content and earn money that they wouldn't get from traditional media" (Oxford Economics, 2022, p. 20). Additionally, YouTube drives "cultural and societal impact" in the UK, with 84% of creators saying they want to leverage the "influence" they found on YouTube "to make a positive impact on society" (Oxford Economics, 2022, p. 21). Furthermore, the use of advertising and marketing on TikTok by small and medium-sized enterprises alone contributed £1.63 billion to the UK's GDP and 32,000 jobs in 2022, with nearly 80% of them outside London (Oxford Economics, 2023). However, more regionally-segregated data could provide insights into the economic impacts across different UK regions, help us better understand regional disparities in the creator economy, identify opportunities for regional development, and target policy interventions.

Overall, career pathways in social media content creation grow in their attraction for young people and for experienced workers seeking alternative work arrangements (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). There has been a growing awareness by (1) social media platform companies that they need to provide creators with professional support and (2) the DCMS Committee (2022a) that an additional market review and labour protections are needed. Our research suggests that three of the biggest video-based social media platforms in the UK are profitable and arguably have the

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resources to help deliver this professional support. For example, the revenues and profits of Google UK, a subsidiary of the California-based and YouTube-owned Alphabet Inc, increased steadily from £1.2 billion and £153 million, respectively, in 2017 to £3.3 billion and £896 million in 2021 (see Table 1). Likewise, Facebook UK's revenues increased from £1.2 billion in 2017 to £3.3 billion in 2021, while its profits grew from £58 million to £229 million during this period (see Table 2). Similarly, Amazon-owned Twitch UK has consistently been successful, generating revenues of £28 million in 2017 and £34 million in 2021, with profits of £954 thousand in 2017 and £852 thousand in 2021 (see Table 3). However, more policy attention needs to be given to creators at the regional level and the wider social media economy. It is incumbent on policymakers to bring into closer dialogue and place appropriate scaffolding around creative industries, digital strategy, and social media content creators' unique employment aspirations in particular regions. In what follows, this paper brings these insights to bear by examining revenue streams, professional training and networking spaces, and collective trade representation vis-à-vis Yorkshire creators.

Table 1: Google UK Revenues and Profits, 2017-2021

Year	Revenue (GBP)	Profit (GBP)	Profit Margin (Percent)
2017	1,265.4	153.2	12.1
2018	1,406.7	180.7	12.9
2019	1,599.9	181.5	11.3
2020	1,805.5	226.0	12.5
2021	3,391.6	896.8	26.5

Note. Data retrieved from Google UK (2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022)

Table 2: Facebook UK Revenues and Profits, 2017-2021

Year	Revenue (GBP)	Profit (GBP)	Profit Margin (Percent)
2017	1,265.2	58.4	4.6
2018	1,600.0	96.6	6.0
2019	2,180.2	115.7	5.3
2020	2,460.8	190.1	7.7
2021	3,346.3	229.6	6.9

Note. Data retrieved from Facebook UK (2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022).

Table 3: Twitch UK Revenues and Profits, 2017-2021

Year	Revenue (GBP)	Profit (GBP)	Profit Margin (Percent)
2017	28,622	954.6	3.3
2018	44,093	1,146	2.6
2019	63,956	1,038	1.6
2020	82,033	2,954	3.6
2021	34,523	852.0	2.5

Note. Data retrieved from Twitch UK (2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022).

3.2 Creator Revenue Streams

Like elsewhere, many UK creators monetise their content through at least two income streams: (1) revenue-sharing models on platforms, such as YouTube, Twitch, Facebook, and TikTok; (2) brand partnerships and sponsorships; and/or (3) third-party merchandising, tipping, and subscription platforms (Adobe, 2022; Christison, 2022; ConvertKit, 2022; DCMS Committee, 2022a; Florida, 2022; NeoReach, 2022; Oxford Economics, 2022; Patreon, 2022). First, platforms' revenue-sharing models typically offer creators a split of the income earned from different sources.

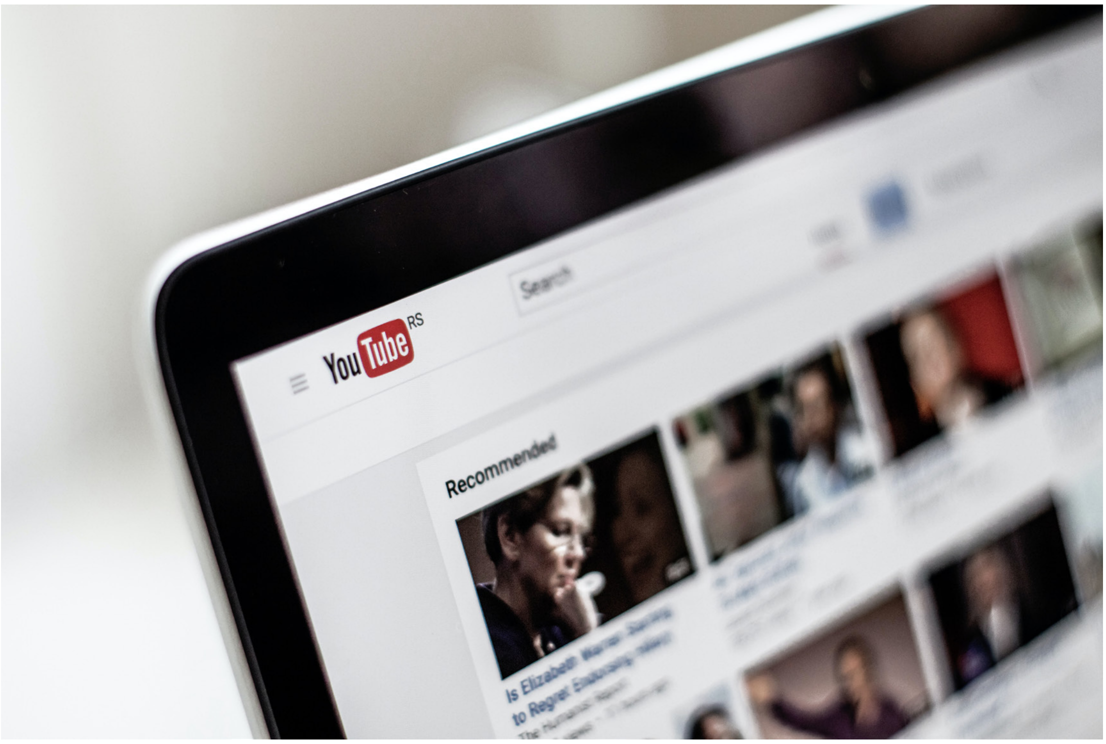
The YouTube Partner Program paved the way for revenue sharing, launching in 2007 and expanding to the UK in 2008 (YouTube Team, 2008). The rates currently range from 45% to 70% (Google, 2023b). Under the Commerce Product Module, YouTube creators earn 70% of net revenues from channel memberships and fan donations through YouTube's virtual currency—Super Chat, Super Stickers, and Super Thanks. From Watch Page Ads, YouTube pays creators 55% of net revenues from ads shown or streamed on their public videos. From Shorts, creators earn 45% of the revenue from YouTube's Creator Pool based on their proportion of views. YouTube creators can also earn a share of Premium membership revenue based on how much members watch their content (Google, 2023c). To earn revenue from advertising and Premium revenue, creators must have at least 1,000 YouTube subscribers and either 4,000 public watch hours on long-form videos in the last year or 10 million public Shorts views in the last 90 days (Google, 2023a). Conversely, to earn revenue from channel memberships and virtual currency, creators need at least 500 subscribers, three public uploads in the last 90 days, and either 3,000 public watch hours on long-form videos in the last year or three million public Shorts views in the last 90 days.

Likewise, Twitch offers two programmes for creators to earn revenue globally: the Partner Program and the Affiliate Program. The Partner Program was rolled out in 2011, and the Affiliate Program followed in 2017 (Fontaine, 2017; TwitchTV, 2011). Creators in both programmes can earn revenue through viewers' subscriptions to their channel, receiving Twitch's virtual currency (Bits) from viewers, and displaying video advertisements (Clancy, 2022; Twitch, 2022, 2023b). Both Partner and Affiliate creators earn 50% net revenue from subscription earnings, 1 cent (USD) per received Bit, and 55% net revenue from ads. To be eligible for the Affiliate Program, creators must have at least 50 followers, and, in the last 30 days, stream for eight hours total, on seven different days, with an average of three concurrent viewers (Twitch, 2023a). To qualify for the Partner Program, creators must meet higher requirements: streaming for 25 hours total, on 12 different days, with an average of 75 concurrent viewers over a 30-day period.

Similarly, Facebook UK creators can earn revenue through advertisements and direct content monetisation. In-stream ads, which were launched in the UK in 2018 (Smith & Rajwat, 2018), are based on the number of impressions and CPM of ads displayed in creators' content (Meta, 2023a). To be eligible for live video in-stream ad revenue, creators must have at least 10,000 followers and accumulate 600,000 total minutes viewed in the last 60 days, with at least 10% of those minutes from live videos, and have five active videos, with at least three of them previously livestreamed (Meta, 2023c). To earn revenue from video on-demand in-stream ads, creators need at least 5,000 followers and 60,000 total minutes viewed in the last 60 days, with five active videos. Additionally, Facebook UK creators can earn revenue directly from their content. Fans can buy "Stars," which were launched in 2018, and tip creators with at least 1,000 followers over the last 60 days; creators earn 1 cent (USD) for each Star they receive (Facebook, 2022; Meta, 2023b; Miller, 2018). Since 2020, creators have also been able to generate revenue from monthly subscriptions, offering their viewers exclusive content (Arnstein, 2020). Until 2024, Facebook (2022) will take no share of subscription revenue, allowing creators to earn 100% of the fees that subscribers pay.

Next, TikTok introduced its revenue-sharing model in the UK in 2018 (Oxford Economics, 2023). The platform offers several ways for creators to monetise their content. First, the Creator Fund was launched in the US in 2020 and expanded to the UK in 2021 (TikTok, 2020, 2021a, 2023a). Creators earn from the Creator Fund based on video views and engagement. To be eligible, TikTok creators must have at least 10,000 authentic followers and 100,000 authentic total video views in the last 30 days. Second, viewers can send creators tips using TikTok's Video Gift virtual currency feature, which launched in 2021 (TikTok, 2021b, 2023c). To qualify, creators should have at least 100,000 followers and published a public video in the last 30 days. Previously, viewers could tip creators only through TikTok's real-time LIVE Gifts feature. Third, in 2022, TikTok (2022, 2023b) introduced its first ad-revenue sharing programme, TikTok Pulse, in the US. The platform expanded this programme to the UK in 2023. With TikTok Pulse, brands can buy ad placements alongside the top 4% of TikToks per day.

Second, creators generate revenue through endorsements and affiliate partnerships (Christison, 2022; DCMS Committee, 2022a; Florida, 2022; Geyser, 2023; Gleam Futures, 2022; Linktree, 2022). Endorsements involve sponsored advertorials embedded in creators' content or social accounts. Creators are offered cash (a flat rate or percentage of sales), discounts on products or services, giveaways, or free samples. Conversely, affiliate partnerships involve creators posting brands' URLs or personalized codes on their personal social accounts. They earn a commission based on viewer clicks or overall sales.



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Third, creators earn revenue from merchandising, tipping, and subscription platforms (Christison, 2022; ConvertKit, 2022; DCMS Committee, 2022a; Florida, 2022; Linktree, 2022; NeoReach, 2022; Oxford Economics, 2022). Merchandising includes direct sales of goods and services, books, artworks, live speaking engagements, e-courses, and branded products. Additionally, tipping platforms, like PayPal, enable fans to make one-time donations to support creators' work. Furthermore, subscription services, such as Substack's premium newsletters, offer fans exclusive content for monthly fees, with platforms taking a share of creators' earnings. For example, Patreon, co-founded by Jack Conte in San Francisco in 2013, currently takes between 5% and 12% of creators' revenue and a processing fee (Patreon, 2023a, 2023b). UK-based Ko-fi is a "Patreon Alternative" (Ko-fi Labs, 2023) founded by Nigel Pickles in 2017 (Companies House, 2017). Its free account has zero platform fees on fan donations and only a 5% fee on subscriptions, creators' merchandise, or commission sales.

Recent research reveals that brand deals have become the primary income source for creators who earn money from this work (NeoReach, 2022). In 2021, 63% of creators engaged in a brand collaboration at least once (Linktree, 2022), and brand deals accounted for 77% of creators' earnings (Florida, 2022). By 2023, more brands had paid influencers in cash than given them free products, but most brands still did not pay (Geyser, 2023). Despite the prevalence of brand deals, there is no industry-wide consensus on standard brand pay rates (DCMS Committee, 2022a). Additionally, creators might lack the experience or resources to negotiate fair rates or obtain legal support.

In our interviews, Yorkshire creators report challenges in making a decent living from platforms' revenue-sharing models. They face pressure to target specific content niches and achieve high follower, subscriber, or viewer counts to be eligible for revenue-sharing programmes. Some creators also express concerns about the revenue split on various platforms, with opinions ranging from TikTok being the "worst" to YouTube being the "breadwinner," according to one creator. For example, some interviewees feel that TikTok suppressed their views after joining the Creator Fund. Furthermore, interviewees highlight the disparity between platforms' profitability and the limited earnings creators receive through subscriptions and donations. For instance, a gaming streamer thinks that Twitch could pay more, considering that the company makes a lot of money, as outlined earlier. Yet, at least there is more potential to earn money on some platforms. As one creator puts it, "Instagram is probably the hardest one to earn money on. It's mainly sponsorships on there. You do have affiliate links as well but again, that comes from a brand perspective, whereas the other ones are actual platform specific pots of money." Creators suggest that platforms should prioritise fair compensation and explore direct revenue models.

Yorkshire creators also engage in ongoing brand partnerships and sponsorships with various companies, including Yorkshire, national, or international brands. Some creators have experience collaborating with Yorkshire brands related to tourism, government, or universities. However, many interviewees report that the majority of their brand deals come from generic, international, or national companies based in London. Some creators think that just being located in the UK, rather than Yorkshire, increases their likelihood of getting these brand deals. However, creators still recognise missed opportunities to work with Yorkshire-specific regional brands. For example, during an interview, a gaming creator realised the potential for collaborations with Yorkshire football clubs due to his livestreams of FIFA. This creator indicates a possible avenue for regional brand initiatives and additional creator revenue growth.

Finally, Yorkshire creators diversify their revenue streams through third-party subscription and merchandising platforms. Some interviewees rely on subscription services like Patreon, appreciating the higher earnings retained compared to social media revenue-sharing models. One gaming creator reports using Ko-fi as a "Patreon Alternative" (Ko-fi Labs, 2023) due to its lower fees and UK-based roots: "[Ko-fi] are actually very, very kind. They're a UK-based company and they're always supporting UK creators." Moreover, Yorkshire creators sell self-produced merchandise, like the fashion creator who uses Instagram to "direct traffic" to her e-commerce shop on UK-based Depop to "generate sales." Like creators elsewhere, several interviewees also supplement their incomes by selling their books, photography, and art prints, teaching e-courses on platforms like Skillshare, or offering live speaking engagements (ConvertKit, 2022; Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Florida, 2022). Overall, many creators find content creation more cost-effective because Yorkshire is "cheaper" compared to London, offering potential benefits amid fluctuating monthly pay or low earnings. However, creators' ultimate goal is to earn more revenue directly and obtain a larger share of the pie. They could be guaranteed minimum pay rates (DCMS Committee, 2022a) or a "Creator minimum wage…ensuring that current minimum wage laws fully cover creative labour" (Florida, 2022, p. 28).

3.3 Creator Professional Training and Networking Spaces

Some platforms have established programmes in recent years to support and promote diversity and inclusion among creators. For example, the #YouTubeBlack Voices Fund was launched in 2020, giving more than 300 Black creators in the UK and elsewhere access to professional resources and funding: a YouTube Partner Manager; seed funding; development sessions on production, community engagement, and well-being; training sessions and workshops; and regular networking opportunities (YouTube, 2023). Likewise, Pinterest launched its Creator Inclusion Fund in the US in 2021, expanding it to UK creators in 2022 "to uplift Creators from communities that have been disproportionately underrepresented – including Black, Latiné, LGBTQIA+, Asian, Indigenous people and people with disabilities" (Pinterest, 2023; also see Pinterest, 2022a, 2022b). During Pinterest's six-week incubator programme, creators receive grant funding, advertising credits, access to resources, and practical learning sessions with Pinterest representatives and industry experts. Additionally, Facebook established its We The Culture programme in 2020 to support Black creators on Facebook and Instagram (Facebook, 2020). Similarly, Snapchat started the Black Creator Accelerator in 2022, offering 25 emerging Black creators with a 12-month-funded educational programme to help them build their careers (Snap Inc, 2022). Only US creators are eligible to apply to the Facebook and Snapchat programmes. However, there is still no programme that is focused exclusively on the UK's distinct regional diversity and inclusion spaces.

YouTube also took the lead in establishing professional training spaces. According to a survey conducted by ConvertKit (2022), 90% of professional creators worked from home in 2021, but platform-run creator spaces have become valuable hubs for professional production and post-production studio facilities, training, and networking opportunities. The first physical YouTube Space opened at Google's London-based King's Cross headquarters in 2012 (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Kyncl, 2021). By 2019, YouTube Spaces were operating in 10 additional cities around the world. Yet, YouTube announced in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic that most Spaces, including the London location, would close permanently. The company shifted to a new flexible hybrid model, relying on virtual and pop-up temporary programming in different physical regional locations with which it started experimenting in 2016. However, there are no long-term accessible professional spaces that could support creators in deprived regions, which could boost regional development and promote economic growth.

Within this context, most creators find it challenging to get professional training and networking opportunities in Yorkshire. Several of our interviewees believe that there are more creator events, spaces, and collaborations with brands and other creators in London or elsewhere. For example, one creator recalls attending events in London, such as VidCon, with "backstage creators that have Instagram rooms or TikTok rooms where you can go and speak to people who work there, and they can give you advice." However, these "popup" spaces by the platforms are not typically open to the public. Some creators have attended Yorkshire blogger events in York, for instance, but ultimately think that they have limited opportunities in the region: "If I want to do any meet and greet or anything, I have to literally leave Yorkshire. There's nothing, honestly, except what I create for myself," said an interviewee, "or the ones that brands from other cities like London, Manchester, Birmingham, etc. create." Yet creators face barriers due to the distance and cost of travelling outside Yorkshire. One creator thinks that there might just be a "disparity" between "London-based Southern creatives" and Northern-based creatives: "I feel like it's much more of a norm [in London] than maybe it is in the North." These challenges may contribute to digital exclusion in Yorkshire, exclusive representation in the creator economy, and barriers to accessing the creator middle class (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Florida, 2022; WP Creative Group, 2022).

To address this perceived disparity, some creators praise the YouTube Space as an excellent model that offers workspaces and networking opportunities for creators. One creator recalls the perks of using the London YouTube Space, among them networking events and taking different classes, for instance, about video editing and video optimisation. Reflecting on the value of the YouTube Space, another creator says, "I feel like having dedicated spaces for content creators to network, to film together, to edit together is a fantastic thing. I think YouTube Space London was a fantastic thing. But it's closed down." While the London YouTube Space has been shut, a food creator suggests that a regional public "Creator Hub" be developed in one of the big Yorkshire cities, such as Leeds. This Creator Hub could be low-cost subscription-based, like £10 monthly. A Creator Hub could provide access to professional-quality video recording and lighting equipment, and kitchen space, along with opportunities to meet up with other creators and get professional support. Other Yorkshire-based creators would arguably welcome a Creator Hub. As one creator puts it, "It would be nice to be able to connect with people who are from your area, instead of just going on to Facebook and talking to someone random to give you advice, having someone to share things." Thus, the government could help establish "neighbourhood-based Creator Spaces" (Florida, 2022, p. 28)—or what we call "Creator Hubs"—at public libraries and educational institutions. These Creator Hubs could become part of wider community-based local "Digital Inclusion Hubs" at libraries (HLCDC, 2023).

Additionally, our interviewees indicate that creators highly value community building and learning from each other. These results mirror ConvertKit's (2022) survey research, which found that 60% of creators spent time connecting with creators through Facebook groups and Instagram to share ideas, commiserate, and find inspiration. Yet our interviewees suggest that programmes like YouTubeBlack be expanded, echoing the gap identified above. For example, one creator affirms that YouTubeBlack Voices create opportunities for creators to come together to build community, learn from each other, share tips, meet people who run the platforms, and grow so that they can go viral. By scaling such programmes and "creator funds," as one interviewee puts it, emerging creators could also get new cameras and gear. Platforms could help launch "Creator Schools" (Florida, 2022, p. 27). Overall, running government and platform-supported regional Creator Schools and Creator Hubs could help creators network, work together, and build community, especially given that the UK's only long-term YouTube Space closed down.

3.4 Creator Collective Trade Representation

Some traditional trade unions and professional associations have been open to self-employed UK-based freelance workers in digital media. Notably, the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and Theatre Union, which has about 40,000 members, was founded in 1991 after the merger of the Association of Cinematograph Television and Allied Technicians and the Broadcasting and Entertainment Trades Alliance (Bectu, 2023; Campling & Michelson, 1997). Bectu offers training, like business skills for freelancers and digital skills in social media and online visibility. However, its training and agreements tend to focus on traditional film and television production work. They might not meet the distinct needs of social media content creators who have different professional requirements and career motivations (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Florida, 2022).

By comparison, the Association of Independent Professionals and the Self-Employed (IPSE), which launched in 1999, is the only not-for-profit association dedicated exclusively to the UK's 4.3 million self-employed workers, including freelancers, across the country's labour force. IPSE empowers its members with professional resources, among them a contract review service, career advice, and co-working desk and meeting spaces in London (IPSE, 2023a). IPSE also campaigns on behalf of self-employed workers to reform government policy and work with industry stakeholders on various issues, such as wellbeing and security, taxation, and late payment (IPSE, 2023b). However, like Bectu, they might not address the unique professional needs and issues of social media creators.

Responding to the non-existence of a collective trade organisation exclusively for social media creators, UK-based creators Kat Molesworth and Nicole Ocran founded The Creator Union in 2020 (TCU, 2021). They aim to represent and advocate for digital content creators who work and earn their income online from influencer work or from other work completed directly on social media platforms. TCU will campaign for fair pay and working conditions and offer legal support. However, TCU is still in the process of registering as a legally recognised union, which would enable them to build their membership, collect member fees, negotiate contracts, and potentially address creators' distinct professional interests across the UK's regions.

Our interviewees were typically unaware of any collective trade organisations that support creators, but most of them are generally supportive of unionisation. They suggest that a labour organisation, like TCU, could play a powerful dual role for regional creators. First, a creator-specific union could advocate for creators to mitigate against risks: perceived legal wrongdoings; underpayment; and pay transparency. There is a perceived need to support creators when negotiating deals that result in "dodgy contracts," according to one creator, so that brands do not take advantage of them. Many interviewees are concerned about lengthy payment waiting times and non-payment and think that a creator union could take industrial action against brands that take a long time to pay creators. Some creators go as far as suggesting that a creator union could advocate for minimum pay rates. Furthermore, a creator union could negotiate pay with social media companies and with brands, rather than rely on platforms' revenue-sharing models or the pay rates that brands negotiate with individual creators. Thus, pay minimums could provide more transparency and level the playing field for creators. As one interviewee puts it, a union could ultimately serve as a collective voice for creators "to speak out about the horrific things that [are] going on in the industry without getting their name blacklisted." These findings support the advocacy role of unionisation for creators identified by the DCMS Committee (2022a), promoting better working conditions and fair pay.

Second, a creator union could help with professionalisation: skills development and training; information sharing and education; creator funding; and community networking. For example, interviewees suggest that a union could help educate and support creators about their rights, especially copyright protection, and draw up legal contracts. Additionally, several interviewees maintain that a union could provide creators with access to wider networks, help them build community, and combat the isolation of working alone from home. This professional role is important in Yorkshire because it could enable creators to get more opportunities in the region, rather than having to travel elsewhere. As one creator puts it, a union could take the lead in setting up accessible spaces where creators come together to discuss common issues. Unionisation could ultimately help get content creation recognised as a professional job and a legitimate career field, according to another creator. These comments suggest that unionisation could serve a wider role for creators than mainly advocating for better pay and working conditions, as outlined by the DCMS Committee (2022a).

Despite the potential benefits, some creators mention the challenges of unionisation. Considering the broad scope of what constitutes a creator, some interviewees affirm that there should be clear criteria around who would be eligible to join a creator union and how to establish fair membership fees. Additionally, one creator maintains that the only realistic benefit of unionisation regarding pay is negotiating better subscription and viewer requirements with platforms before creators can start earning money, rather than negotiate pay rates; the latter comes down to the work of individual creators. This tension between individualism and collectivism was echoed by another creator, who thinks that creators are their "own boss" and already have a lot of freedom that might be compromised after unionisation, reflecting findings in previous research on unionisation (Cunningham & Craig, 2021; Niebler & Kern, 2020; Salamon, 2020). Collective representation might not be a cure-all for creators' financial and professional struggles; however, it could provide a vital starting point for ongoing and industry-wide support (e.g., setting up minimum pay rates and Creator Hubs), if membership criteria are clearly defined, accessible, and balance advocacy with professionalism.

4. WHAT NEXT / ACTION POINTS?

The labour of regionally-diverse social media content creators is central to the UK's levelling up policy agenda and a national digital strategy. Social media content creation generates value for the creative industries, creates regional job opportunities, contributes to the country's GDP, and positively impacts communities. Thus, the following action points could ensure creators get more representation in policy and industry programmes:

1. Reorganise platform payment schemes, increasing the revenue split for creators, delinking payment from mainly follower, subscriber, and/or view counts, and providing start-up funding from social media platforms and the government.

For example, funding programmes like YouTube's Black Voices Fund and Pinterest's Creator Inclusion Fund could be expanded. Platforms could explicitly set up Creator Regional Inclusion Funds. Additionally, the UK Government's Creative Scale Up Programme and the Cultural Investment Fund could invest funds in the social media economy and content creators, recognising their value to the creative industries. Furthermore, the government could establish a minimum wage for creators.

2. Facilitate regional brand partnerships and collaborations, leveraging another revenue source for creators.

These collaborations might include, but are not limited to, regional travel, government campaigns, museums, university marketing, and sports. Regional brand diversity and inclusion could be highlighted in an Influencer Marketing Code of Conduct or a "Creator Bill of Rights" (Florida, 2022, p. 28), ensuring creators gain access to these opportunities.

3. Launch regional long-term physical Creator Hubs and programmes for training, networking, and funding, with support from platforms, collective trade organisations, and the government.

For example, creators have been self-organising within their communities, but they could benefit from the professional resources of established organisations and the direct financial assistance of platforms and government funding initiatives. These regional Creator Hubs could be run collaboratively within wider Digital Inclusion Hubs by platforms, creators, and collective trade organisations. They could be housed in existing spaces, such as public libraries and universities, with media production equipment, software, studio space, and other professional supplies.

4. Recognise professional collective trade organisations to advocate for and support creators at the regional level, providing advice and education about creators' rights (e.g., self-employed workers' rights, contracts, and copyright protection), professional training, mentoring, and networking opportunities.

TCU should be not only legally recognised but also visible, accessible, and have clear criteria for membership. Furthermore, legacy collective trade organisations, such as BECTU and IPSE, could increase their visibility and devote more resources to support social media creators. Collective trade organisations could also campaign for a Creator Bill of Rights, ensuring industry-wide minimum pay rates for creators are covered. This Bill of Rights could be sustained through government and platform policies.

These action points could foster more collaboration and inclusion in the digital creative industries among creators, policymakers, platform companies, collective trade organisations, and public institutions to support diverse regional perspectives and incubators of future talent. These points raise implications for boosting regional development, pay, jobs, living standards, and economic growth across the UK beyond London in regions like Yorkshire (HMG, 2022). They could ensure creators receive a living wage, valuable professional training, and networking opportunities within their region (DCMS Committee, 2022a; Florida, 2022). They could also support creators in building viable careers in content creation and establishing regional clusters of creators outside other big global cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York.

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