

Scroll, Post, Reflect

A Qualitative Study Exploring Ethics, Values, and Reflective Actions in Identity Work and Personal Branding of Creative Content Creators on TikTok and Instagram

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ABSTRACT

In today's digital economy, content creators on TikTok and Instagram continuously navigate tensions between authenticity, commercial pressures, and ethical responsibility. While previous research has explored identity work and personal branding, less is known about which ethical decisions, personal values, and reflective actions shape the construction and performance of digital identities in these highly visible and commercialized spaces - and how they play out in practice. Therefore, this study investigates the research question: *Which ethical decisions, values, and reflective actions play a role in the identity work and personal branding of creative content creators on TikTok and Instagram? And: how do these play out in their respective context?*

To answer this question, ten in-depth semi-structured interviews with diverse creative content creators were conducted. Using thematic analysis, this research uncovered how these creators navigate the ethical and strategic dimensions of their online presence, structured around six key themes. First, ethical dilemmas frequently arise when balancing authenticity with commercial interests, deciding whether to speak out on sensitive issues, and managing the tension between privacy and visibility. Second, personal values - particularly authenticity, integrity, and social responsibility - serve as key guiding principles in content choices and collaborations. Third, reflective actions such as peer feedback, archiving, and self-evaluation play an essential role in aligning online self-presentation with offline values. Additionally, platform logic and algorithmic pressures significantly influence creators' identity work, shaping what is considered visible, valuable, or appropriate. Audience expectations similarly impact ethical decision-making, functioning both as a source of pressure and as a driver for reflection. Ultimately, the construction of digital identity is a dynamic, ongoing negotiation between personal values, audience dynamics, and platform affordances.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how content creators embed ethics and values into their digital identity work. It also highlights the need for further research into how these dynamics differ between creators with varying levels of visibility, and how long-term exposure to algorithmic pressures affects identity, well-being, and decision-making.

KEYWORDS: *Identity Work, Personal Branding, Ethical Decisions, Values, Reflective Actions*

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1. Introduction

With the rise of social media, a new form of communication emerged, characterized by new modes of interaction and publicness (Boyd, 2010, pp. 39-40). Social media is a participatory, people-to-people medium that leverages Web 2.0 technologies to facilitate connections between individuals (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). It also enables users to create, share, and consume user-generated content, making it a truly participatory system (Mazziotti, 2024, pp. 465-466). Due to this active engagement, social media has evolved into much more than just a communication tool, it has become a space where media is shaped by the identities that exist online (Lüders et al., 2022, p. 2). Conversely, these identities are also shaped by users' contributions on the platforms (Lüders et al., 2022, pp. 2-3). In this way, social media has become a central arena for identity construction, self-expression, and entrepreneurship (Rettberg, 2017, p. 28-30). Platforms like TikTok and Instagram now serve as stages where millions of users express themselves, build audiences, and give meaning to who they are, or aspire to be (Chen, 2023, p. 1).

Within this development, creative content creators have acquired a distinctive role as individuals who produce user-generated content in the digital age for the digital economy (Sundawa & Trigartanti, 2018, pp. 282-283). This group is broad, encompassing influencers, artists, activists, digital entrepreneurs, and even parents sharing photos of their children. These creators employ audiovisual and narrative techniques to construct an online presence and connect with followers (Ma et al., 2023, p. 2-4). Their content takes many forms, ranging from playful creative clips to formal social commentary.

Constructing an online identity, however, is neither a neutral nor a purely creative act. As various (if not all) actors pursue different goals online, their interests sometimes align, but also intersect and conflict (Brown, 2015, pp. 31, 34; van Dijck, 2013, p. 203). To name a few, content creators must navigate tensions between self-expression and strategic visibility, and between authenticity and commercial imperatives (Kolo et al., 2024, pp. 60-62). While some aim for genuine engagement with their audiences, others may feel pressured to collaborate with brands, follow algorithmic trends, or tailor their content to maximize reach and engagement (Abidin, 2016, pp. 4-5). Identity work can intensify in response to such tensions (Beech et al., 2012, p. 39). Within this dynamic, ethics, personal values, and reflective actions play a crucial role. How do creators remain true to their core values when external incentives reward different behaviors? How do they navigate the blurred boundaries between self-expression, commerce, and social responsibility? These questions highlight the need to explore not only what content creators do, but how they reflect on their actions, values, and ethical positioning. This study aims to investigate how content creators navigate these tensions and engage with the ethical dimensions of their digital identity.

Against this backdrop, the main objective of this thesis is to understand how content creators on TikTok and Instagram make sense of and act upon their ethical responsibilities, personal values, and reflective choices while constructing, enacting, reflecting on, reframing, changing, adapting, etc. their digital identities. The central research question is:

Which ethical decisions, values, and reflective actions play a role in the identity work and personal branding of creative content creators on TikTok and Instagram? And: how do these play out in their respective context?

1.1 Societal and Scientific Relevance

The relevance of this study extends far beyond the analysis of a digital niche. Content creators have become influential figures within contemporary culture. They shape aesthetic trends, disseminate social messages, and can act as role models for millions of followers worldwide (Sobczak, 2024, pp. 284-285). Especially for younger audiences, online identities are a key source of information, inspiration, and identification. Unlike traditional media figures, creators appear accessible and authentic, which amplifies their influence (Patalauskaitė, 2024, p. 370).

At the same time, their roles are increasingly subject to public scrutiny. How do online identities handle issues such as misinformation, greenwashing, cancel culture, or the commodification of personal experiences? In an age where the boundary between private and public is increasingly blurred and algorithms shape what becomes visible, content creators must become increasingly aware of their ethical responsibilities. This awareness is especially relevant given recent public controversies, such as the Dutch influencer Famke Louise, who faced widespread criticism in 2020 for publicly opposing COVID-19 measures without sufficient knowledge or reflection (NOS, 2020). This case illustrates how a lack of ethical awareness can have significant consequences for both the individual and the broader media landscape.

Moreover, content creators play a growing role in shaping consumer behavior. According to a recent study by Influencer Matter Communications (2023), 61% of consumers are more likely to trust influencer recommendations over traditional advertising. This underscores their societal responsibility: the way they act ethically and communicate their values has a direct impact on social norms and behaviors. By centering the moral considerations of creators, this study contributes to the broader societal debate on digital responsibility and ethical conduct in online spaces.

Academic literature offers a rich body of work on identity and self-representation in online contexts. The concept of "identity work" provides a useful framework for understanding how individuals continuously construct, maintain, and adapt their self-conceptions in interaction with

digital and social environments (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165; Brown, 2015, p. 23).

Likewise, research on "personal branding" illustrates how individuals strategically build a distinctive online presence to gain economic or cultural capital (Gorbatov et al., pp. 4,10, 2018; Khedher, 2013, pp. 63-68).

Media studies increasingly emphasize the role of platform culture, where algorithms and visibility function as power structures (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 83). Platforms like Instagram and TikTok largely determine what is seen, shaping content creators' behavior, positioning, and even the content of their reflective actions (Cotter, 2019, pp. 896-897, 908). Meanwhile, scholars in creative industries research acknowledge the pressures creators face to balance creative autonomy with economic survival (McRobbie, 2016, p. 939).

Despite this extensive literature, the ethical dimensions of these processes remain underexplored. Media ethics has traditionally focused on journalism and institutional media professionals, with less attention given to social media creators (Patalauskaitė, 2024, p. 368). Furthermore, there is limited discussion on the role of "reflective actions" among content creators: how they evaluate their choices, articulate their values, and engage in critical self-examination. While reflection is well-established in educational and leadership research (Schön, 1983; Raelin, 2021), its application in digital media practices remains scarce. To address this gap, this thesis builds on practice-based approaches to ethics, which frame moral action not as the application of abstract rules, but as an ongoing, situated negotiation within specific social and technological contexts (Foucault, 1984; Couldry, 2012). From this perspective, ethical conduct among content creators emerges through their everyday decisions - such as whether to follow trends, partner with brands, or respond to criticism - within algorithmically mediated environments (Foucault, 1984; Couldry, 2012; Bucher, 2018). This study aims to explore how creative content creators practice ethics and reflect on their values while navigating digital identity work under these conditions.

1.2 Method and Structure

To answer the research question, a qualitative research design was employed. Qualitative methods are especially well-suited to exploring complex, dynamic social processes and allow for the investigation of meaning, subjectivity, and experience (Awasthy, 2019, p. 146; Hammarberg et al., 2016, p. 499). For this, I study conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 10 creative content creators who are active on TikTok and/or Instagram. This method allows participants to share personal experiences, reflections, and decision-making processes, and provides space for new insights to emerge during the conversation (Boeije, 2012). Since ethical values and decisions are

inherently situated and subjective, qualitative interviews provide the necessary depth to explore how creators make sense of their moral responsibilities within the fluid dynamics of digital identity work.

Participants have been selected based on relevance for the study and accessibility. By purposive sampling both more well-known and less visible creators have been included to ensure diversity in perspectives. Convenience sampling and snowball sampling was also used, where initial participants could recommend other creators in their networks (Etikan et al., 2016, p. 2).

The interviews have been analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 77-98). Via this analysis recurring themes and patterns have been identified in which values, ethics, and reflective actions play a role in the identity building online. Both explicit statements and underlying motivations have been examined to provide a rich and nuanced understanding of ethical behavior and reflection in digital identity practices.

Short overview of structure

This thesis began by introducing the research topic, highlighting its societal and academic relevance, identifying a knowledge gap, and formulating a central research question. A brief explanation of the methodology was also provided. The structure of the remainder of the thesis is as follows. Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical framework. Here, key concepts such as identity work, personal branding, reflective actions, and the role of ethics and values in the practices of content creators are explained and supported with relevant academic literature. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach, including the research design, sampling strategy, and analytical procedures. Chapter 4 presents the results of the study, offering thematically organized empirical findings from the conducted interviews. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the findings in relation to the theoretical framework, while Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by reflecting on the broader implications and offering final insights. Finally, the appendix includes the following supporting materials: the informed consent form, an overview of the codes, and the full interview question list in both Dutch and English.

This structure enables a clear and systematic exploration of the role of ethics, values, and reflective actions in the identity work and personal branding of content creators, contributing to ongoing academic and societal conversations about digital identity and responsibility in the age of social media.

2. Theoretical framework

In order to understand how creative content creators navigate the ethical, strategic, and personal dimensions of their work on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, it is essential to explore a range of interconnected theoretical concepts. This framework provides an in-depth discussion of identity work, personal branding, the role of creators in the digital economy, the significance of values, ethics and reflective actions of content creators. Together, these concepts offer the necessary lens through which to analyze how creators construct their digital selves while balancing authenticity, visibility, and responsibility.

2.1 Identity work

Since the work of creative content creators in the digital economy largely revolves around making the self visible, expressing a personal vision, and leveraging individuality as a form of capital, it is essential for this research to explore the concept of identity work in more depth.

2.1.1 *Building a Self By Identity Work*

Identity work refers to the continuous process through which individuals construct, maintain, and adapt their self-conceptions, often in response to dynamic social environments (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). It encompasses “the ways in which people create, adapt, signify, claim, and reject identities from available resources” (Brown, 2017, p. 298). This involves individuals engaging in activities to form, repair, maintain, and revise their sense of self in order to achieve coherence and distinctiveness (Brown, 2015, p. 23).

While there are arguments both in favor of and against the idea that identity is a fixed concept, scholars who focus on identity work (Brown, 2015; Leitch & Harrison, 2016; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Winkler, 2018) tend to view identity as a fluid and adaptable construction of the self. There also is broad consensus that identity is shaped through interaction with others in social contexts (Horst & Hitters, 2020; Watson, 2008) and is responsive to changing circumstances and environments (Brown, 2015, p. 21). Identity work, then, involves individuals reflecting on their sense of self and their surroundings, while considering how to act in accordance with external conditions (Brown, 2017, p. 305).

Thus, Identity work also includes the active process of creating and adjusting one’s identity (Brown, 2017, p. 298). Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003, p. 1163) argue that identity can manifest across various levels - organizational, individual, professional, and social. The concept of identity has been defined by many scholars. For example, Brown (2015) suggests that identity is the meaning

people assign to themselves when answering questions like “How should I relate to others?” and “What should I strive to become?” (p. 21). Similarly, Alvesson et al. (2008) pose the foundational questions “how should I act?”, “who am I?”, “why am I here?”, or “what is my job?” (p. 6). These questions always carry an emphasis on meaning in the broadest sense. Therefore, Identity work inevitably involves grappling with the moral implications of one’s public persona, prompting reflection on how to act. As Brown (2015, p. 26) notes, it often goes hand in hand with ethical considerations.

According to Giddens (1991), self-identity is the narrative individuals construct about themselves by reflecting on personal experiences and the diverse ideas they encounter, which provides them with a sense of coherence and security (p. 53). This narrative approach to identity becomes particularly relevant in digital environments, where content creators navigate the blurred boundaries between private and public life. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) join this idea by emphasizing that identity regulation can serve as a form of organizational control, suggesting that content creators are shaped by platform algorithms and audience expectations, even as they aim to express their individuality (pp. 623-625).

Watson (2008) further argues that a distinction can be made between self-identity - the internal perception of who one is - and social identities, which are shaped by cultural and institutional norms (p. 131). This distinction is crucial for understanding how creative content creators strive to align their personal values with the broader expectations of their online communities.

2.1.2 Identity Work in the Digital World

On platforms like TikTok and Instagram, creative content creators engage in continuous identity work by showing facets of their self in self-presentation in content posts. While doing this they navigate a range of tensions. One of the most prominent tensions lies between authenticity and commercial pressure: creators aim to express their personal values and creativity, yet must also conform to algorithm-driven trends and audience expectations to remain visible and successful (Brown, 2015, p. 26; van Dijck, 2013, p. 203). This leads to ethical dilemmas, as self-expression becomes intertwined with self-promotion (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 623). Additionally, creators often struggle to balance entrepreneurial ambitions with their creative identity, especially in spaces where visibility is rewarded over originality (Beech et al., 2012, p. 40).

Thus, identity work in digital environments is not only about presenting the self - it is also about negotiating boundaries between personal values, platform structures, and the ever-changing demands of the digital economy (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, pp. 103-104). Beech et al. (2012) note that identity work can intensify in response to such tensions (p. 39). The need to constantly

adapt to shifting norms, trends, and feedback creates instability and can challenge a creator's sense of self. Identity work is therefore not limited to negotiating or rejecting conflicting roles (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165); it also involves actively shaping and reshaping one's identity in response to the dynamics of digital culture.

Recent research shows that algorithms and platform structures significantly influence both visibility and behavior (van Dijck, 2013, pp. 202-204), pushing creators to remain responsive and adaptable. In line with Leitch and Harrison's (2016) understanding of identity as dynamic and socially constructed (pp. 178-179), identity work on these platforms goes far beyond branding - it requires ongoing negotiation of personal values, platform logic, and the rapidly evolving demands of the digital economy. In particular, if you do not see "identity" as something fixed and stable, the question becomes: What is the essence of one self? What is the nature of "experience"? However far away from current every-day life these philosophical questions may seem, they are strikingly relevant. If how you act is only a transitory experience, what relevance do values have? But if everything carries values, because they are reflective of how and why people act, then why is there no stronger focus on values just yet? One may ask: Which are the values we currently see enacted? For that, authenticity receives the biggest attention so far, particularly related to branding and "creating value".

2.1.3 Authenticity

Authenticity in the context of identity refers to a combination of autonomy, sincerity, spontaneity, and adequacy to one's own needs and nature (Karwat, 2021, pp. 39-40). In the digital economy - where identity is performed, branded, and monetized - authenticity has become both a guiding value and a contested concept, especially for creative content creators on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. But is authenticity still possible within mediated cultures?

As Marwick (2013) explains, digital authenticity is inherently performative (p. 168). Influencers and creators must carefully manage their self-presentation to appear authentic, while simultaneously tailoring their content strategically for visibility and engagement (Marwick, 2013, pp. 169-170). This paradox reflects what Banet-Weiser (2012) refers to as "authenticity as brand": the notion that authenticity itself has become a form of marketable capital (p. 10). Rather than countering commercial logic, authenticity becomes entangled with it - deployed to generate trust, relatability, and value within influencer culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012, pp. 56-57).

As Maurice Blanchot claimed: "If there is, among all words, one that is inauthentic, then surely it is the word 'authentic'" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 1). The concept is so saturated with performative expectations that it no longer holds a stable meaning (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 56). The

pursuit of authenticity in digital identity work is thus inherently paradoxical: always desired, but never fully attainable (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 56).

Kristinsson (2021), however, approaches authenticity as an ethical process of self-examination, in which creators must continuously reflect on whether their choices arise from internal convictions or external pressures (pp. 3–4). This perspective adds a deeper moral dimension, viewing authenticity less as a matter of how one appears to others, and more as how one navigates conflicting demands while staying true to personal values.

2.2 Personal Branding

Identity work and *personal branding* are inextricably linked; while identity work focuses on the construction of the self, personal branding serves as its strategic extension within commercial networks (Weisgerber & Butler, 2016, pp. 17-20). For this reason, the concept of personal branding will also be discussed in depth.

2.2.1 The concept of Personal Branding

Personal branding differs from reputation management in that it aims to build brand equity for an individual rather than simply managing how one is perceived (Khedher, 2013, p. 21). *Personal branding* involves individuals marketing oneself to society by developing a distinctive public image for commercial gain and/or cultural capital (Khamis et al., 2016, p. 1; Johnson, 2017, p. 21). Gorbatov et al. (2018, p. 4) describe it as a strategic process of self-promotion and professional development. According to Johnson (2017), a key part of this process includes developing, maintaining, and promoting one's personal image or brand (p. 21). It also involves introspection, understanding one's existing brand, developing a brand mantra, creating both physical and digital footprints and communicating your message (Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015, p. 181). The expression of the self in online spaces has amplified personal visibility in the digital age and made the concept of personal branding increasingly prominent (Gorbatov et al., 2018, pp. 2, 4).

To understand how an individual can establish themselves as a brand online, it is important to first explore what a brand is and what it consists of. A brand can be seen as a strategic tool that organizations use to communicate their value and unique position in relation to competitors (Horst, 2019, p. 2). It encompasses "the sum of all brand behaviors and communications" (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010, p. 21). According to Keller (2013), a strong brand is built on two key components: first, brand awareness - the extent to which consumers recognize the brand and associate it with a specific product or service; and second, brand associations, which refer to the strong and meaningful connections consumers make with the brand or its name (pp. 71-76).

From a dramaturgical perspective, personal branding entails the creation of a *persona* and the performance of a digital portrait through the strategic sharing of information with a connected audience (Khedher, 2013, p. 64). This process requires ongoing self-monitoring and active management of one's public image in everyday life. Within branding literature, the concepts of *persona* and *positioning* are central, as they collectively shape the overall image of a personal brand. A *persona* is defined as "the articulated form of the brand's character and personality," which should be recognizable, memorable, and capable of forming an emotional connection with the audience (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010, p. 21). The more authentic and credible the persona, the greater the trust and loyalty it can foster among followers or consumers. *Positioning* refers to the place a brand occupies in the consumer's mind in relation to competing brands - something that requires careful consideration and consistency (Kosteljik & Alsem, 2020, p. 14). Ultimately, personal branding serves as a pathway to professional success and a strategic tool for achieving personal and career goals in a competitive environment (Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015, p. 188; Khedher, 2013, pp. 64-65). A positive brand image, developed through an authentic persona and a clear positioning strategy, is therefore highly desirable.

2.2.2 Branding an Individual Online

With the increasing influence of social media, the act of branding has moved beyond corporate contexts into the realm of the individual (Johnson, 2017, p. 22). Particularly for influencers and content creators on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, personal branding has become a necessary practice for achieving visibility, building community, and generating income (Khamis et al., 2016). These individuals often evolve into so-called *human brands*, leveraging their personality, lifestyle, and values to attract audiences and collaborate with commercial partners (Johnson, 2017, pp. 21-23). Khedher (2013) even argues that everyone using social networks engages - either consciously or unconsciously - in the development of a personal brand (p. 65)

In the digital environment, personal branding is deeply intertwined with *storytelling* as storytelling is the means by which brand personas come to life (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010, p.21). Creative content creators do not merely make content, they construct narratives that resonate emotionally with their audience and create a sense of authenticity, enabling brands to connect with audiences on a personal level (Lund et al., 2018, p. 272). Lund et al. (2018) argue that the distinctiveness of a brand lies in its ability to tell a compelling and original story (pp. 272-274) - one that, as Salenbacher (2016) emphasizes, must feel authentic and credible. "The storytelling image typically emphasizes a somewhat romantic view of the individual as being fairly integrated and equipped with creativity and language skills, almost like an artist" (Alvesson, 2010, p. 204). Each piece

of shared content contributes to this ongoing narrative, making creators natural storytellers. If a story evokes enough emotional engagement, whether positive or negative, it can spread rapidly across networks and go viral, directly strengthening the visibility and perceived value of the creator's personal brand (Lund et al., 2018, pp. 272, 275, 276).

Successful personal branding on social media requires deliberate and strategic action. It involves building a consistent and recognizable online presence that reflects both personal identity and professional intent (Keller, 2013, pp. 568-569). Effective strategies include curating relevant content, engaging with followers, and maintaining coherence across posts and platforms (Keller, 2013, pp. 250, 563). To reinforce their brand identity, individuals should be intentional about their visual presentation, such as profile photos and design aesthetics, and use different platforms in a way that aligns with their message (Franzia, 2018, pp. 19-20).

In short, branding an individual online is not a passive reflection of who someone is, but an active, ongoing process of shaping perception in a competitive attention economy. Through authenticity, storytelling, and platform-specific strategies, creators translate their identity into influence - and ultimately, into economic or cultural capital. Capital here is a relative concept, derived from relevance, meaning, and perceived "value" within a specific context, based on what others "want" and "need" (Haines & Lötter, 2022, pp. 5, 8) By aligning their personal brand with these forms of value, creators are able to generate capital.

2.3 Creative Content Creators in the Digital Economy

To gain a better understanding of the context in which this research is situated, this section will take a closer look at Creative Content Creators in the Digital Economy. First, the digital economy itself will be examined to outline the broader landscape. Then, the concept of creative content creators will be discussed. Following this, these creators will be considered within the dynamics of the digital economy. Finally, the social media platforms TikTok and Instagram will be explored specifically to provide a clear picture of their role in this context.

2.3.1 Digital economy

The digital economy has emerged from the rapid development of information and communication technologies (Øverby & Audestad, 2021, pp. 2-3). It is a complex and evolving concept, with various interpretations found. A key insight is that the scope and definition of the digital economy vary significantly. For instance, Bukht and Heeks (2017) define it as the part of economic output primarily driven by digital technologies (p. 2), whereas Abbas et al. (2021) describe

it as the transformation of traditional economic activities into digital forms (p. 5547). This variation highlights the lack of consensus regarding its precise boundaries.

The digital economy has enabled the rise of major global players such as Google, Amazon, and Meta, and continues to evolve through emerging domains like the platform economy and the attention economy (Øverby & Audestad, 2021, pp. 6, 13). Despite the diversity in definitions, five core elements are commonly recognized:

1. Digital technologies as the foundation: The digital economy refers to economic output that is entirely or largely based on digital technologies and business models built around digital goods or services (Bukht & Heeks, 2017; Swamy, 2020; Zimmermann, 2000).
2. Economic transformation: It involves a shift in business models and market structures, driven by the integration of digital tools and systems into all aspects of the economy (Bukht & Heeks, 2017; Abbas et al., 2021; Shostak et al., 2024)
3. Connectivity: The digital economy functioning depends on *hyperconnectivity* - the growing interconnection of individuals, organizations, and machines via the internet, mobile technologies, and the Internet of Things (Brubaker, 2020, p. 772). It relies on extensive networks connecting people, devices, and data (Pangestu & Dewi, 2017; Dutta & Mia, 2011; Hernandez, 2017).
4. Data and information as core resources: Digital technologies and data are essential for developing new products and services. In this context, digital information and knowledge become the key production factors (Koski, 2012; Guellec & Paunov, 2018).
5. Innovation: The digital economy is characterized by continuous innovation through new business models and technological breakthroughs. It represents a shift that is transforming global economic structures and productivity in ways comparable to earlier industrial revolutions (Al-Kasasbeh, 2024; Ungureanu, 2021; Swamy, 2020).

In sum, the digital economy reshapes how value is created and exchanged, blurring the boundaries between the physical and virtual, the local and global, and the individual and institutional. Its development lays the groundwork for new forms of labor, entrepreneurship, and cultural production in an increasingly data-driven world.

2.3.2 Creative content creators

Creative content creators are individuals who produce user-generated content in the digital age for the digital economy (Slater & Wruuck, 2012, p. 163; Sundawa & Trigartanti, 2018, p. 282). They have become key players in the digital economy, actively producing and distributing content across platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube (Sundawa & Trigartanti, 2018, p. 282).

Enabled by the low entry barriers and global reach of these platforms, creators combine creative expression with entrepreneurial strategies (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, pp. 3-12). Although there is no universally accepted definition of creativity, it is generally understood as something that can be developed, observed, and shaped by contextual and social factors (Stubbé et al., 2015, pp. 5-6).

Unlike traditional media players, content creators operate independently, with their success largely depending on performing authenticity and building emotional connections with followers, which fosters trust and engagement (Abidin, 2016, pp. 4-5). At the same time, they must navigate the pressures of platform algorithms and visibility metrics, which strongly influence what content is seen and promoted (Cotter, 2019, p. 897). Thus, creative content creators distinguish themselves from traditional media professionals through their ability to merge personal storytelling with platform-specific aesthetics while continuously adapting to algorithmic demands (Cotter, 2019, pp. 899-900, 908; Cunningham & Craig, 2019, pp. 3-5).

2.3.3 Creative Content Creators in the Digital Economy

Content creators can flourish because of digital media. Broadly speaking, the internet has democratized innovation, enabling more individuals than ever to create and distribute content (Slater & Wruuck, 2012, pp. 164-165). Social media platforms play a pivotal role in promoting this content, allowing artists to build careers without large marketing budgets (Slater & Wruuck, 2012, p. 165). The rise of social media and interactive platforms has also redefined the concept of authorship, shifting from traditional terms to user-generated content and platform-driven engagement strategies (Mazziotti, 2024, pp. 465-466).

Content creators are central to the digital economy, producing innovative and engaging content across multiple platforms (Kolo et al., 2024, p. 59). These online platforms drastically reduce production and distribution costs, allowing independent creators to publish their work with ease (Slater & Wruuck, 2012, p. 165). Creators claim expertise through authenticity and affect, establishing emotional connections with their audiences, which in turn makes them valuable partners for advertisers (Arriagada, 2021, pp. 3-4).

However, social media platforms often encourage creators to share content without direct compensation, relying on monetization through audience growth (Mazziotti, 2024, p. 466). This dynamic challenges creators to balance maintaining their personal values with the commercial pressures of audience engagement and revenue generation (Kolo et al., 2024, p. 61).

To understand the position of creative content creators in the digital economy, it is important to consider why audiences consume social media content in the first place. Drawing on Uses and Gratifications Theory, Whiting and Williams (2013) identify ten motivations for social media use,

including social interaction, information seeking, passing time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, convenience utility, opinion expression, information sharing, and surveillance or knowledge about others (p. 365). Ferguson et al. (2015) further emphasize the role of intrinsic motivation, showing how psychological needs like autonomy, competence, and relatedness influence engagement with online content (pp. 298-307). Additionally, Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) argue that social media consumption is often tied to identity performance, as users engage with content that reflects or supports their self-image (p. 103). These insights are essential when examining the personal branding of content creators, as audience expectations and consumption patterns shape the way creators navigate ethical choices, express values, and construct their digital identities.

2.3.4 Instagram & TikTok

Two of the most influential platforms for creative content creators in today's digital economy are Instagram and TikTok (Abidin, 2021, p. 4). Both platforms are highly accessible and user-friendly, requiring only a smartphone and a free account to begin creating (Khamis et al., 2017, p. 4). They rely heavily on user-generated content (UGC) to drive engagement and growth, making them ideal for personal branding (van Dijck, 2013, p. 12).

Instagram, launched in 2010 by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, started as a photo-sharing app but has evolved into a platform dominated by curated images, professional photography, and branded content (Leaver et al., 2020, pp. 6-9). With the introduction of Stories (2016), IGTV (2018), and Reels (2020), it has shifted toward video content to compete with TikTok (Instagram, 2021a). Its Explore page algorithm curates content based on user behavior, enhancing visibility and audience growth for creators.

TikTok, launched globally in 2016 by ByteDance, focuses on short-form video content, with clips ranging from a few seconds to ten minutes (Socialnomics, 2023). Unlike Instagram's follower-based model, TikTok's For You Page (FYP) uses a hyper-personalized algorithm, allowing creators to go viral even without an established audience (Socialnomics, 2023). TikTok offers extensive in-app editing, filters, and sound integration, lowering the barriers for polished content creation (Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2022, 172).

Both platforms are governed by algorithmic systems that shape what users see. As Hill (2015) explains, algorithms are rule-based systems designed to produce specific outcomes based on user data (p. 58). This not only determines visibility but also how users are profiled and how content trends emerge (Hill, 2015, p. 37).

A key difference is in their aesthetic: Instagram traditionally emphasizes aspirational, polished visuals, while TikTok prioritizes dynamic, relatable, and often humorous video content (Kaye et al., 2022). However, this distinction is fading as Instagram pushes more video and TikTok expands into photo carousels and longer videos.

Both platforms have enabled countless creators to transform casual content - like sketches, tutorials, and storytelling - into personal brands and sustainable careers. Success depends on balancing authenticity with algorithm-driven visibility, reflecting the realities of the attention economy.

2.4 Reflective actions

Reflective actions, or reflective practices, are essential processes through which individuals actively examine their experiences, thoughts, and behaviors in order to develop deeper understanding and improve future actions (Hedberg, 2008, pp. 12-13; Larrivee, 2000, pp. 293-294; Schön, 1983, pp. 49-69). One of the early scholars, Schön (1983), distinguishes between *reflection-on-action* (reflecting after the act) and *reflection-in-action* (thinking critically during the act itself) (pp. 54-56). Later scholars have expanded the scope of reflection far beyond individual professional improvement, linking it to ethics, organizational change, and collective learning processes (Raelin, 2002, pp. 67-68; Stahl, 2005, pp. 117-118).

2.4.1 Individual and Collective Dimensions of Reflection

Reflection is often associated with introspection. However, Hedberg (2008) emphasizes that it is not merely self-observation but a rigorous cognitive process that requires critical analysis, synthesis, and questioning of one's assumptions (pp. 13-14). This perspective aligns with Raelin (2002, pp. 67-69; 2021, pp. 386-388), who advocates for *reflective leadership practices*, in which reflection is embedded not just in the mindset of a single leader, but in collaborative, day-to-day processes of decision-making and teamwork. His *leadership-as-practice* framework suggests that reflection is not only about personal development but is foundational to democratic and participative forms of organizing. Since the digital society mirrors such participative dynamics, these ideas can be meaningfully applied to social media platforms.

Schön's (1983, pp. 54-56) concept of *reflection-in-action* has been further developed by scholars like Matsuo (2012, pp. 611-613) and Raelin (2021, p. 387), who emphasize how reflective practices within teams and organizations foster continuous learning and ethical decision-making - particularly under conditions of uncertainty and rapid change. These are precisely the kinds of

conditions that creative content creators often face in digital environments, making this line of thinking directly relevant to their context.

Stahl (2005) expands reflection to the organizational level. In his theory of *reflective responsibility*, he argues that in a world of growing complexity and unpredictability, businesses cannot rely solely on traditional ethical frameworks (pp. 117-119). Reflective responsibility requires continuous openness, awareness of the consequences of one's actions, and active engagement with multiple stakeholders. Stahl's approach resonates strongly with Raelin's call for collective and democratic reflection within organizations (Raelin, 2021, pp. 387-390; Stahl, 2005, p. 127).

A particularly relevant tension appears in the work of Clarke and Holt (2010), who challenge the common view in management literature that reflection is mainly a tool for improved performance (pp. 319-322). They argue that reflection is central to ethical entrepreneurship. Drawing on Kant's notion of reflective judgment, they show that truly ethical entrepreneurs do not simply follow existing rules or chase public approval - they critically question conventions and create new values through rational reflection.

In the context of learning and professional development, scholars like Hedberg (2008, pp. 11-13) and Inamdar & Roldan (2013, p. 749) argue that reflection should be a core component of management education. Despite the increasing recognition of reflective capabilities, they note that this skill remains one of the least systematically taught. Yet reflection is crucial not only for *subject learning* (mastering concepts) but also for *personal learning* (developing self-awareness) and *critical reflection* (understanding the broader social and ethical context) (Hedberg, 2008, pp. 11-13).

A similar idea emerges in the work of Skordoulis and Dawson (2007), who advocate for the use of Socratic dialogue within organizations (p. 992). In these structured conversations, employees are encouraged to critically examine their assumptions, explore alternatives, and collectively build new insights. This process echoes the tension between thought and action that Schön (1983) identified but transforms it into a dialogical, co-constructed form of learning (pp. 54-56).

2.4.2 Reflective Practices for Content Creators

Reflective practices are therefore vital for learning, ethics, and adaptive leadership in rapidly changing environments - especially in digital spaces. For creative content creators on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, reflective action is indispensable. For them, reflection:

- is not only an individual process (Schön, 1983, p. 54; Hedberg, 2008, pp. 12-13), but also a relational and collective one, where creators engage in conversations about norms, trends, and responsibility (Raelin, 2002, pp. 67-69, 74-75.; Skordoulis & Dawson, 2007, pp. 993-996.);

- is not only aimed at professional success or visibility, but also at critically re-evaluating values and moral choices (Clarke & Holt, 2010, p. 320; Stahl, 2005, pp. 119-122);
- is especially crucial in times of digital uncertainty, when platform rules and algorithms are constantly shifting and creators must make decisions without clear guidelines (Matsuo, 2012, pp. 610-611, 619-620; Raelin, 2021, p. 387).

For content creators, reflection is more than thinking about what works online or how to grow a following. It is a means of becoming aware of their impact on followers, of learning from experience, and of taking responsibility for the messages they communicate. By integrating reflective practices into their creative routines - through peer feedback, open dialogue, or structured self-evaluation - they can not only adapt to the demands of digital platforms but also help build a more ethical and meaningful online culture.

2.5 Values, ethics and reflective actions of content creators

In today's digital landscape, content creators on TikTok and Instagram play a central role in shaping public discourse, cultural norms, and consumer behavior (Patalauskaitė, 2024, p. 370; Sobczak, 2024, p. 284-287). Their influence extends beyond entertainment; through visual storytelling, they actively contribute to the formation and redefinition of societal values and ethical standards. This responsibility brings with it a number of ethical challenges, both in terms of personal values and reflective practices.

2.5.1 Ethical Challenges in Digital Content Creation

TikTok and Instagram offer low-threshold tools for sharing stories, opinions, and visual content with a global audience. At the same time, this accessibility and visibility bring forth several ethical tensions. Content creators on these platforms are often confronted with issues such as the intentional or unintentional spread of misinformation, exposure to online hate, privacy violations (e.g., filming others without consent), and the commercialization of personal experiences (Thomas et al., 2022, pp. 7-9). Patalauskaitė (2024, pp. 368-370) points out that creators – whether consciously or not – influence how followers interpret social issues, consumer behavior, and cultural norms. Due to the ease of creating content and the rapid pace of production on Instagram and TikTok, the risk of skipping ethical reflection significantly increases (Meral, 2021, p. 158).

Importantly, the content that creators share does not exist in a vacuum: it is actively consumed, interpreted, and reshaped by diverse audiences. As described earlier, social media users are drawn to content that resonates emotionally, affirms their identity, or offers moments of escape and connection (Ferguson et al., 2015, p. 304; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p. 103). As a result,

creators may feel compelled to produce highly personal or emotionally charged content to meet these expectations. This dynamic can blur the line between genuine expression and strategic self-presentation, complicating ethical decision-making in relation to privacy, authenticity, and self-exploitation.

Moreover, both platforms operate on powerful algorithmic systems that reward certain types of content with visibility and virality. Sensational, emotionally charged, or controversial videos are often prioritized in the “For You” or “Explore” feed (Eyman, 2015, pp. 128-132). As a result, content creators may feel pressured to push their moral boundaries simply to remain visible or relevant. At the same time, the opaque nature of these algorithms makes it difficult to fully grasp the ethical implications of their decisions (Zuboff, 2023, pp. 497-500).

A major dilemma for many TikTok and Instagram creators is finding the balance between personal values and commercial interests. Brand deals, collaborations, and influencer marketing opportunities can present creators with ethical questions, such as: Am I promoting a brand that aligns with my values? Am I participating in a trend that reinforces harmful stereotypes? To whom is what I am doing relevant and meaningful, and why? Do I want to do, or need to do, what the audience “wants”? Abidin (2016) shows that creators are constantly faced with decisions about how authentic they want to be, and what compromises they are willing to make (pp. 4-5)

The phenomenon of *context collapse* adds to these challenges. On both TikTok and Instagram, content is often simultaneously viewed by friends, strangers, customers, and companies. As a result, creators must navigate multiple – and sometimes conflicting – audience expectations within a single message, complicating their ethical decision-making process (Marwick & Boyd, 2011, p. 122).

2.5.2 The Role of Reflective Practices

Reflective practices can help content creators become more aware of their influence, public image, and decision-making. Both *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action* are relevant for creators who are constantly faced with choices about collaborations, content tone, and platform visibility (Schön, 1983, pp. 54-56).

One useful method for developing ethical awareness among content creators is the formulation of core personal values or the development of a personal mission statement (Laird-Magee et al., 2015, p. 156). For creators, this could involve asking questions such as: What do I stand for as a content creator? What are my non-negotiable boundaries? Do I really want to associate myself with this?

In addition to individual reflection, collective reflection can also be highly valuable. For instance, creators might engage in discussions with peers about moral dilemmas or controversial

trends. Raelin (2016) argues that shared reflection leads to stronger collective norms and a greater sense of responsibility – an approach that could strengthen the ethical culture on both Instagram and TikTok (pp. 57-63).

Concept	Definition	Source
Algorithm	A finite, abstract, effective, compound control structure, imperatively given, accomplishing a given purpose under given provisions. Algorithms shape the information we see and the decisions made about us, based on encoded rules and data inputs.	Hill, 2015, pp. 37, 58.
Authenticity	Authenticity in the context of identity is a combination of autonomy, sincerity, spontaneity, and adequacy to one's own needs and nature.	Karwat, 2021, pp. 39-40.
Brand	A strategic tool that organizations use to communicate their value and unique position in relation to competitors.	Horst, 2019, p. 2.
Creative Content Creators	Individuals who produce user-generated content in the digital age for the digital economy.	Slater & Wruuck, 2012, p. 163; Sundawa & Trigartanti, 2018, p. 282.
Digital Economy	The digital economy is the part of the economy largely driven by digital technologies and business models, characterized by economic transformation, hyperconnectivity, data as a core resource, and continuous innovation.	Abbos et al., 2021; Bukht & Heeks, 2017; Dutta & Mia, 2011; Guellec & Paunov, 2018; Øverby & Audestad, 2021.
Ethical Decisions	Ethical decision making refers to the process through which individuals evaluate and choose among alternatives in a manner consistent with ethical principles and standards.	Ford & Richardson, 1994, pp. 205-206.
Identity Work	The continuous process through which individuals construct, maintain, and adapt	Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165.

	their self-conceptions, often in response to dynamic social environments.	
Personal Branding	Individuals marketing oneself to society by developing a distinctive public image for commercial gain and/or cultural capital, a strategic process of self-promotion and professional development.	Gorbatov et al., 2018, p. 4; Johnson, 2017, p. 21; Khamis et al., 2016, p. 1.
Values	Beliefs about trans-situational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or group.	Schwartz, 1992, p. 4.
Reflective Actions	Essential processes through which individuals actively examine their experiences, thoughts, and behaviors in order to develop deeper understanding and improve future actions.	Hedberg, 2008, pp. 12-13; Larrivee, 2000, pp. 293-294; Schön, 1983, pp. 49-69.
Self-Identity	The narrative individuals construct about themselves by reflecting on personal experiences and the diverse ideas they encounter, which provides them with a sense of coherence and security.	Giddens, 1991, p. 53.
Self-Image	The total subjective perception of oneself, including an image of one's own body and impressions of one's personality, abilities, and so on.	Bailey, 2003, p. 383.
Self-Presentation	The process by which individuals attempt to influence the impressions others form of them, often by adjusting their behavior.	Snyder, 1981, p. 387.
Story Telling	Constructing narratives that resonate emotionally with their audience and create a sense of authenticity.	Lund et al., 2018, p. 272.

Table 1. Overview of main concepts and distinctive definitions

3. Method

This chapter presents the methodological approach of this research. It describes the qualitative method and its rationale, the sampling strategy and participant selection, and the data collection process. It then explains the operationalization, outlines the data analysis steps, and concludes with the quality criteria applied.

3. 1. Description of Methods

Although there is literature on identity work (Brown, 2015; Horst & Hitters, 2020; Leitch & Harrison, 2016; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008; Winkler, 2018) and personal branding (Khedher, 2013; Gorbатов et al., 2018; Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010; Khamis et al., 2016; Khedher, 2013; Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015), and on these processes taking place online (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Brown, 2015; van Dijck, 2013), it has not been extensively examined which ethics, values and reflective actions play a role in the shaping and maintaining of online figures identities.

This study adopts a qualitative research design, which is the most appropriate method for addressing the research question. A qualitative approach is particularly suited for exploring complex, dynamic social environments, as it captures the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals and groups (Awasthy, 2019, p. 146). As this study focusses on identity work and personal branding, which are both highly personal, a qualitative approach can illustrate and understand the potentially complex personal experiences and reflections of the participants with these concepts. Also, this type of research is not aimed at generating reproducible, factual data but rather at uncovering deeper meanings behind human behavior and social phenomena (Hammarberg et al., 2016, p. 499).

Given that this study seeks to understand how content creators perceive and integrate ethics, values, and reflective actions into their identity work and personal branding, a qualitative approach is essential. Ethical values and decisions are often deeply personal, contextual, and not easily reduced to predefined categories or quantifiable measures. They involve reflection, negotiation, and interpretation, which cannot be fully understood through surveys or fixed-response methods. A qualitative approach allows participants to articulate their own understandings of what is ethically meaningful in their online identity work, and how they weigh personal values against platform pressures, audience expectations, or commercial goals. Interpretation plays a key role here: rather than seeking universal truths, this research aims to uncover how ethics are lived, experienced, and navigated by individuals in their specific digital environments. Unlike quantitative methods, which focus on numerical data and generalizability, qualitative research emphasizes detailed, nuanced insights.

To answer the research question, in-depth interviews were held to gather data. In-depth interviews allow participants to express their personal experiences and views in their own words, offering rich, contextualized data (Boeije, 2012). As Boeije (2012) highlights, qualitative research enables a deeper understanding of social phenomena, providing detailed and context-specific information. This method is particularly valuable for understanding ethics, as it allows participants to explain how they reflect on and navigate moral dilemmas and responsibilities in their online identity work. Interviews make it possible to explore how ethical considerations are personally experienced and interpreted within specific digital contexts.

The interviews had a semi-structured approach, in order to give the participants the feeling of an open conversation and to enable them to state their personal opinion in their own words (Boeije, 2012; Jackson et al., 2007, p. 25). By giving the participants the opportunity to share their full story by not restricting them to a fixed and standardized set of questions, way more personal and rich data will be gathered (Jackson et al., 2007, p. 22). The semi-structured approach also allows for potential follow-up questions that arise during the interview, and that fit the specific interviewee and their personal state on Instagram or TikTok the best (Boeije, 2012). Rather than assuming a fixed moral framework, this approach gives voice to participants' own definitions of what it means to act ethically as a content creator, revealing the nuances, tensions, and contradictions in their personal context and identity work.

After conducting the interviews, the collected data was systematically structured and interpreted in order to uncover underlying meanings (Boeije, 2012). The specific approach to analyzing the data will be explained in detail in section 3.5. Furthermore, the quality standards applied to this research will be addressed in section 3.6.

3.2 Sampling

Now that the rationale behind the qualitative research design has been discussed, the next chapter will provide an overview of the sampling strategies employed and introduce the units of analysis selected for this study.

3.2.1 Sampling method

The overall sampling process primarily relied on convenience sampling, making use of existing personal connections within the Dutch creative content creator scene. This approach was chosen for its practical advantages, particularly the accessibility of participants and their willingness to participate (Etikan et al., 2016, p. 2). Convenience sampling proved especially effective for reaching

more prominent content creators, who are generally less inclined to participate in research but were more open to doing so through a personal connection.

Since it was preferred that the participants met a number of criteria, as explained in section 3.2.2, purposive sampling was employed afterward. In purposive sampling, a form of non-probability sampling, the researcher relies on their own judgment and knowledge to select participants who are most relevant to the aims of the study (McCombes, 2019). This method ensured that candidates within the sampling pool were selected based on their relevant and diverse knowledge and experience regarding the core themes of this research (Boeije, 2012). Because purposive sampling involved prior knowledge about potential participants, it supported the inclusion of interviewees from various backgrounds, enriching the study by incorporating different perspectives from within the field.

In addition, snowball sampling was used to further expand the sample. Initial interviewees were asked to recommend other content creators within their networks, which made it easier to reach a broader and more diverse group of participants (Boeije, 2012). This strategy helped include creators from a variety of backgrounds - in terms of profession, and online visibility - thus contributing to a richer and more nuanced understanding of the topics explored.

In total, ten interviews were conducted using a mix of the sampling strategies mentioned. An overview of the interviewees can be found in section 3.2.2. Considering the scope and time frame of this research, these interviews provided sufficient qualitative depth for a meaningful and substantial analysis.

3.2.2 Research participants

As previously described, purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants had diverse personal experience and diverse knowledge related to content creation in the digital environment. Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

First, this research focuses on creative content creators who are active on TikTok and/or Instagram, as these platforms are widely used for creating, editing, and sharing creative content due to their accessible and user-friendly tools. The definition of a content creator is broad and includes anyone with internet access who produces user-generated content (Slater & Wruuck, 2012, p. 163; Sundawa & Trigartanti, 2018, p.282). This broad definition allowed for the inclusion of a diverse group of potential participants. However, all participants were required to be actively using TikTok and/or Instagram and to regularly create their own content.

Since the line between casual users and dedicated creators can be ambiguous - yet both fall under the umbrella of "creative content creators" - the study deliberately included both more

prominent and lesser-known creators on the two different social media apps. Preference was given to individuals with a larger following (< 4,000 followers), as they tend to be more deliberate in their identity work and personal branding due to their broader audience, greater influence, and emerging commercial interests. At the same time, participants with average or below-average follower counts were also actively sought out and included to ensure a balanced and comprehensive perspective on the topic.

Furthermore, the sample aimed for some diversity in age in order to gain a broader understanding of how ethics, values, and reflective actions may evolve over time and differ across demographic groups. In total, ten interviews were conducted. As is typical in qualitative research, the goal of the sampling process was not to achieve statistical representativeness, but rather to capture a rich and varied range of perspectives and experiences (Boeije, 2012). The combination of criterion-based selection and variation in visibility contributes to the depth and relevance of the study's findings.

Participants	Age	Followers on Instagram (Day of Interview)	Followers on TikTok (Day of Interview)	Duration Interview
R1	30	1K	60	00:39
R2	27	18,9K	-	00:40
R3	65	37	-	00:41
R4	28	1,5K	8K	00:45
R5	24	28K	70K	00:48
R6	18	1.4K	70	00:44
R7	21	1.2K	100	00:42
R8	24	3.8K	18K	00:39
R9	25	9.5K	31K	00:42
R10	32	115K	425K	00:25

Table 2. Overview interview participants

3.3 Data collection

The search for potential interview participants was conducted within the researcher's personal network, using either Instagram direct messaging or WhatsApp. The initial outreach focused on creative content creators already familiar to the researcher. From there, contact was established with additional creators within their extended networks. This snowball sampling approach was

employed to (a) ensure greater diversity within the sample and (b) facilitate access to participants who might otherwise be hesitant to take part in such studies.

Whenever possible, interviews were conducted face-to-face and were recorded using the voice recorder app on an iPhone. In cases where in-person meetings were not feasible - due to scheduling conflicts, privacy concerns, long travel distances, or other factors - interviews were conducted via Zoom. These sessions were also recorded using the iPhone's voice recorder app. During each interview, the researcher regularly checked to ensure the recording was functioning properly. All recordings were later transcribed in full, partially with the online AI tool TurboScribe and partially by hand. These transcriptions formed the basis of the analysis.

Participants were provided with a consent form outlining the purpose and terms of the study. They were asked to either sign the form or give verbal consent for the recording and the use of their data in this research. The consent form is included in Appendix A.

3.4 Operationalization

To explore the main concepts of this research, a semi-structured interview guide was developed, based on five key themes: being a creative content creator, identity work, personal branding, reflective actions, and ethical decision-making. Each theme included open-ended questions designed to gain deeper insight into how content creators construct their online identity, engage with personal values, and critically reflect on their practices. The interview guide was prepared in both English and Dutch and is included in Appendix C.

To understand the participants' positioning, the interview began with questions about how they see themselves within the digital economy. Follow-up questions about identity and self-perception provided insight into the process of identity construction in digital environments. Questions on personal branding and online visibility shed light on how creators strategically position and differentiate themselves. These initial parts of the conversation were essential to establish a foundation and understand each participant's perspective and background.

The second half of the interview focused on personal values, reflective actions, and ethical considerations, aiming to uncover how participants think about responsibility, boundaries, and the influence of algorithms and audience expectations. This thematic structure enabled the identification of relevant experiences, tensions, and strategies related to ethics, values, and identity in the context of social media content creation.

3.5 Methods of Analysis

For the analysis of the data collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis (TA), as described by Braun and Clarke (2006, pp. 77-99), was employed. This method was chosen for its flexibility and its suitability in identifying and interpreting meaningful patterns (themes) within qualitative data. Thematic analysis allowed for a rich and detailed exploration of how creative content creators on TikTok and Instagram reflect on ethics, values, and personal branding within their identity work.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase model: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data through interview transcription and repeated reading to identify preliminary ideas; (2) systematically coding interesting features across the dataset; (3) searching for themes by grouping similar codes and gathering relevant data extracts; (4) reviewing themes to ensure internal coherence and consistency with the entire dataset; (5) defining and naming the themes by determining their essence and clarifying their link to the research question; and finally (6) producing the report, in which themes are discussed with illustrative examples and linked to broader analytical insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 86-93).

In addition, constructivist grounded theory, consisting of three coding processes, was used to guide the thematic development (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 47-71). The first phase involved open coding, in which data segments from the transcripts were assigned preliminary labels based on their content (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 47-51). This process was carried out using ATLAS.ti. Next, axial coding was conducted, identifying relationships between codes and combining similar ones into broader categories. The clusters were named using active descriptors, which enabled an innovative understanding of category development (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 57-61). This phase was conducted in Excel. The third and final process of constructivist grounded theory - selective coding - was conducted, during which axial codes were clustered to explain overarching phenomena (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 63-71). This enabled theoretical sampling, whereby the researcher returns to the original theoretical framework to identify connections and contrasts with the selective codes, also referred to as 'themes' (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, pp. 144-146). In this study, the themes identified through selective coding were linked to the original theoretical concepts on identity work & personal branding, values & ethics online, reflective actions & platform working in the digital age.

Throughout the entire analytical process, the approach remained iterative and reflexive. The data were reviewed multiple times, and earlier coding decisions were revised or expanded as new insights emerged. This cyclical nature of thematic analysis made it possible to develop a nuanced understanding of how ethics and values play a role in the identity work of creative content creators.

3.5.1 Open Coding

In the initial phase, ATLAS.ti was used to generate open codes, consisting of in vivo codes or paraphrased segments of direct quotations and conceptual quotes. A total of 356 open codes were identified, with several codes recurring across the dataset. Examples of this open coding process are presented below.

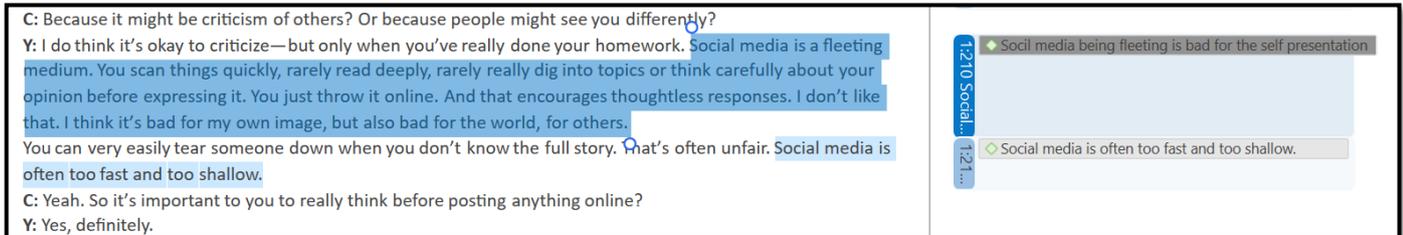


Figure 3. Open coding process example in ATLAS.ti

3.5.2 Axial Coding

After identifying 356 open codes in ATLAS.ti, the codes were exported to Excel for further analysis. To facilitate the process of identifying conceptual similarities, a color-coding system was used. Codes that appeared closely related in meaning were assigned the same color, allowing for preliminary grouping. This process was highly iterative, as many codes overlapped conceptually and required careful judgment to determine the most appropriate grouping. As a result, colors and groupings were frequently adjusted and refined. This iterative comparison led to the development of preliminary sub-themes. An illustration of this color-based grouping method is presented below.

50	Reflective action: comparing with others	6
51	Reflective action: opinion of friends or people looking up to matters	6
52	Authenticity leads to better engagement	7
53	Personal posts are being liked easier	7
54	Low self-presentation online because of fear of identity theft	8
55	Not sharing anything from the private life	8
56	Avoidance of online exposure of work related subjects	8

Figure 4. Color clustering process example in excel

Once code clusters were established based on these color groupings, each group was assigned a label representing its overarching theme - thus forming what is referred to as an axial code. These labels functioned as active descriptors, aligning with Charmaz's (2006) emphasis on meaningful, action-oriented naming (pp. 57-61). In total, 37 axial codes emerged from this ongoing process of refining and clustering the open codes. An illustration of this color-based cluster naming is presented below.

6	Seeking social validation to confirm the success of one's online self-presentation
7	Authenticity enhances follower engagement and connection
8	Choosing not to disclose certain personal elements in digital self-presentation

Figure 5. Axial coding cluster naming process example in word

3.5.3 Selective coding

The final stage of the coding process involved selective coding, during which the overarching themes of this study were constructed. Axial codes were organized into thematic groups using tables in Microsoft Word to explore conceptual relationships and identify patterns of meaning. This phase required a high degree of reflexivity and repeated refinement, as the development of coherent and analytically robust themes is a critical step in qualitative analysis. Ultimately, five central themes were identified, which will be discussed in detail in the following chapter. A visual overview of the selective coding process is provided below.

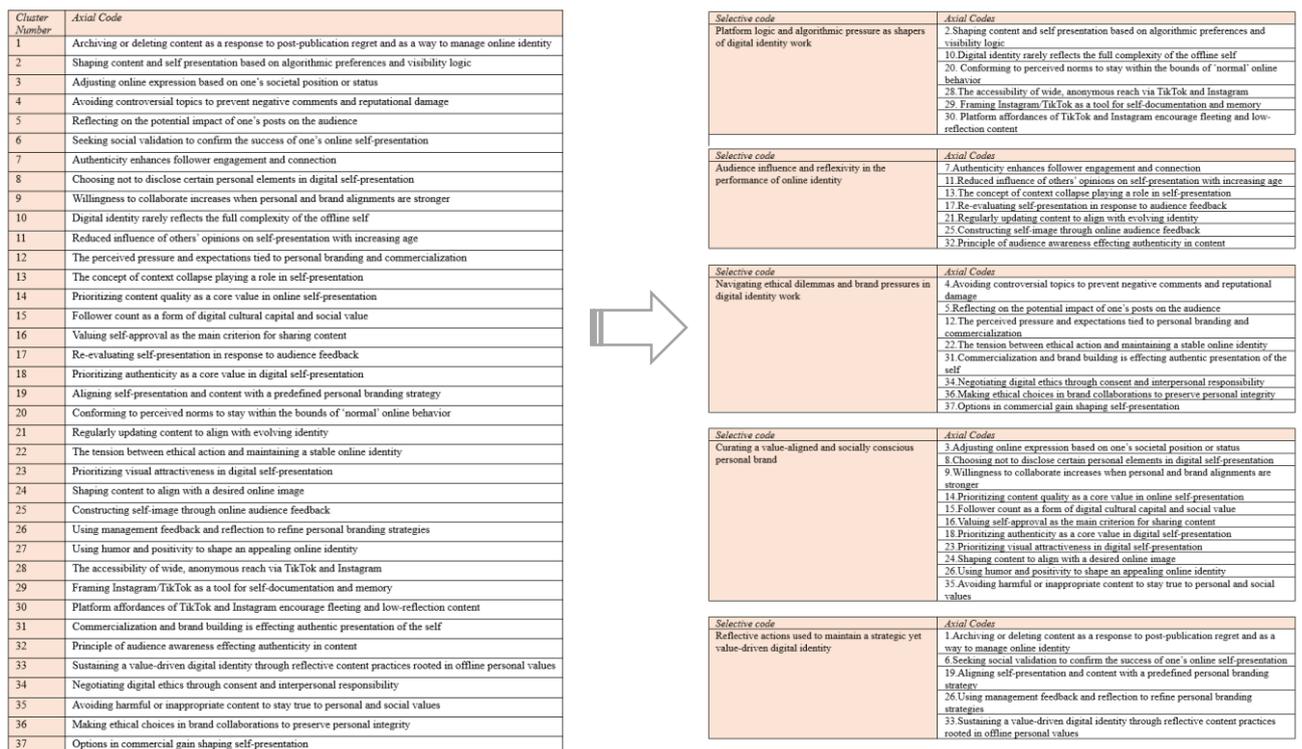


Figure 6. Selective coding process example in word

3.6 Quality criteria

To ensure the quality of this qualitative research, both methodological rigor and ethical considerations were taken into account. As Boeije (2012) emphasizes, aspects such as validity,

reliability, and ethical responsibility are central to the credibility of qualitative research. This section discusses the steps taken to enhance validity and reliability, as well as the ethical principles that guided the research process.

3.6.1 *Validity and reliability*

Babbie (2011) defines *reliability* as the extent to which data yield comparable results when the same phenomenon is observed repeatedly at different points in time (p. 157). To ensure the reliability of this study, and in line with the recommendations of Moisander and Valtonen (2006, p. 27), this chapter aims to provide maximum transparency regarding the research design and the applied approach to data analysis.

According to Moisander and Valtonen (2006), qualitative research must also be conducted in a systematic and rigorous manner (p. 25). This principle has been followed to the best possible extent by first carefully transcribing the interviews, and then manually assigning codes, categories, and overarching themes. Throughout the process, codes were continuously reviewed and refined to enhance the accuracy and consistency of the analysis. To further support transparency, additional information about the coding process as well as the complete interview guide can be found in Appendices B and C.

Validity refers to the degree to which one truly measures what one intends to measure (Babbie, 2011, p. 160). Moisander and Valtonen (2006) describe it as “the truth or accuracy of the representations and generalizations made by the researcher” (p.23). To safeguard the validity of this study, the research design was grounded in a robust theoretical framework, as outlined in Chapter 2. The operationalization of key concepts was based on existing literature, which contributed to the conceptual clarity of the interview guide.

Finally, it is important to reflect on the role of the researcher. My personal background and professional experience within the field of digital content creation may have influenced the interaction with participants and, consequently, the objectivity and accuracy of the data interpretation (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006, p. 29). Every researcher brings certain (conscious or unconscious) preferences into a study, which can affect the emphasis placed on specific findings. In this research, deliberate efforts were made to critically reflect on my own position and to explicitly acknowledge and consider this influence in drawing conclusions.

3.6.2 *Research Ethics*

To promote responsible and careful research practices and prevent misuse within academic research, certain ethical standards have been established following the standards of Flick (2007b, p.

68). In line with these standards, a number of steps were taken throughout this study to safeguard ethical integrity (Flick, 2007b, pp. 68-76).

Prior to participation, all participants received an informed consent form explaining the general aim of the study - without disclosing the precise research question, in order to avoid influencing their responses. The form also clarified that participation was entirely voluntary and could be discontinued at any point. Participants were also informed that they were free to skip any question they did not wish to answer.

To ensure anonymity, participants were told that only their first name or a general label such as "R" with a corresponding number would be used in the analysis and final report. The only identifiable data would be their name and signature on the consent form. To respect their privacy, participants were given the option to provide verbal consent instead of signing the form.

The principles of confidentiality and privacy were fully upheld: interview transcripts were not made publicly accessible, and participants' identities were not disclosed in the sample description, preventing any link between their statements and personal details. All interview data was securely stored and not shared with third parties, thereby guaranteeing confidentiality.

Emotional sensitivity was also considered during the research process. Participants were given the freedom to decline answering any question they found uncomfortable, and to personal or sensitive topics were intentionally avoided. Finally, I, as the researcher, accept full responsibility for this study. I have strived to maintain objectivity and adhere strictly to ethical research guidelines, thus I take full responsibility for the outcome.

4. Results

This chapter presents the results of the study. A thematic analysis of interviews with content creators revealed five key themes, each introduced as a selective code with sub-themes (axial codes) and illustrated by participant quotes (see table 2, section 3.2.2). The first three themes directly address how ethical decisions, personal values, and reflective actions shape digital identity work. The final two highlight how platform logic and audience dynamics influence these processes. Specifically, the themes cover navigating ethical dilemmas, curating value-driven identities, applying reflective actions, responding to algorithmic pressures, and managing audience feedback.

4.1 Ethical dilemmas to navigate in digital identity work

Axial codes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Avoiding controversial topics to prevent negative comments and reputational damage• Reflecting on the potential impact of one's posts on the audience• The tension between ethical action and maintaining a stable online identity• Commercialization and brand building is effecting authentic presentation of the self• Negotiating digital ethics through consent and interpersonal responsibility• Making ethical choices in brand collaborations to preserve personal integrity• Options in commercial gain shaping self-presentation• The perceived pressure and expectations tied to personal branding and commercialization

Table 7. Axial codes of theme 1

Creative content creators face ethical challenges in highly commercialized and visible digital spaces, where competing interests shape decisions about what is 'right.' These decisions directly influence their identity work, personal branding, and self-presentation. This theme, explored through five sub-themes, highlights the key ethical dilemmas they navigate.

Commercialization conflict

The biggest ethical tension revolved around commercialization. Creators often expressed a desire to remain authentic while also recognizing the opportunities and financial benefits of brand collaborations (R8, R9, R10). One content creator gave an example of this branding dilemma:

I don't feel the personal need to really share it again. But because you are a brand, you actually have to say something about it because your audience wants that (R8).

This tension became especially visible when commercial partnerships did not fully align with their personal values. Some content creators spoke of declining collaborations that felt 'off', even if they offered substantial compensation (R2, R5, R9, R10). An example of this ethical selectivity being both empowering and challenging was described by one content creator:

I also know that friends of mine were asked like that now... For things like a Domino's or McDonald's commercial... For which they really got a lot of money. And that they said... I can really use the money... But I really don't support McDonald's. What do I do now? (R8).

It allowed creators to maintain integrity and build trust with their audience, but also sometimes resulted in lost income or missed opportunities. Ethical choices were not always clear-cut, but involved careful negotiation between authenticity and financial necessity.

Balancing authenticity and reputational risk

Many creators spoke of the conscious decision to avoid controversial topics or brands in order to stay neutral and to prevent reputational damage (R4, R5, R7, R8, R9). An example of this was given by one creator:

Then I just think, surely there's some kind of child labor involved. Well, I don't need to associate myself with that (R8).

Even when creators felt strongly about certain issues, they often held back from publicly addressing them due to fear of backlash, misunderstanding, or a shift in how their online persona might be perceived. One content creator gave an example of this ethical dilemma:

I do stay away from really loaded posts, like those Israel Palestine posts that you see sometimes... Maybe I should speak up more? (R7).

This restraint was particularly salient for creators who had experienced audience growth, as visibility was said to come with a heightened sense of responsibility and reputational vulnerability (R5, R9, R10).

Moreover, this avoidance appeared to be deeply tied to the pressure of maintaining a stable and consistent personal brand. As one content creator explained: "it's mainly that a lot of brands

don't want to associate with someone who expresses too many opinions" (R9). Here, creators were negotiating a delicate balance between voicing ethical stances and preserving the trust and clarity of their self-presentation and personal branding (R4, R5, R9).

Debating social impact

Ethical dilemmas also emerged through creators' heightened awareness of the potential influence their content has on others (R1, R2, R3, R5, R9, R10). One content creator described a difficult moment of pause or post-reflection in which they evaluated whether their content was constructive or possibly harmful:

I had stitched something. Someone said: "Would you rather be in... there... would you rather be in... this and that? Or would you rather be in a room with Jesus? Or with... five million? Or... one minute with Jesus?" Then I had stitched it with: "Yeah, I'll take the five million, cause... I'd rather not be in a room with a dead person for a minute." Then... a lot of... yeah, it did go viral of course, but... a lot of hate too. Then I thought, yeah, I don't want to be associated with this at all. I'm not some sort of Jesus-hater or anything, but just a funny... And I also don't want people to... it was never my intention to... I don't make rage bait TikToks. No, it wasn't my intention to provoke people (R5).

Ethical reflexivity did not always seem to result in visible changes to content, but it did influence creators' internal decision-making processes (R3, R4, R5, R9). The interviews revealed that ethical responsibility was not merely an external obligation but a personal and often emotional process. Most of them would state something like: "as long as it doesn't have a negative impact on others, it's fine with me" (R3). Reflecting on their social impact, creators aligned their content strategies with values like inclusivity, kindness, and transparency.

Consent, boundaries, and responsibility

The interviews also revealed how creators navigate the ethics of consent and interpersonal responsibility in posts (R1, R3, R4, R6, R7, R9). Several Content creators shared experiences of having to ask if "my girlfriends also support" content they are in (R4) or trying "not to film people without their consent" (R9). This ethical awareness extended to respecting others' privacy and emotional boundaries, even in environments where content is often rapidly produced and shared without reflection.

The dilemma of brand pressure in becoming a brand

Finally, the dilemma of pressure in personal branding and performance was a recurring source of ethical strain (R2, R4, R5). Many content creators described their resistance in fully committing to the strategy of branding. Some examples of reasons for this were:

- I didn't feel like dealing with the whole, 'now I owe you a post' thing (R2)
- I do think that as Enzo Knol you have to deliver a certain image that you are Enzo Knol (R6)

It was even said that full time personal branding would need adjustments to "figure out a way to make it enjoyable for me. And also, how to... how do you say that... make it sustainable" (R2). These ethics shows the dilemmas to deal with when making the choice between branding or not.

4.2 Curating a value-aligned online identity

Axial codes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Adjusting online expression based on one's societal position or status• Choosing not to disclose certain personal elements in digital self-presentation• Prioritizing content quality as a core value in online self-presentation• Valuing self-approval as the main criterion for sharing content• Prioritizing authenticity as a core value in digital self-presentation• Shaping content to align with a desired online image• Willingness to collaborate increases when personal and brand alignments are stronger• Using humor and positivity to shape an appealing online identity• Avoiding harmful or inappropriate content to stay true to personal and social values• Prioritizing visual attractiveness in digital self-presentation• Follower count as a form of digital cultural capital and social value

Table 8. Axial codes of theme 2

This theme explores which values play a role in content choices and, consequently, in shaping the digital identities of creative content creators. Through five interconnected sub-themes, this section unpacks the thoughtful, value-driven approaches creators take in curating their identities on TikTok and Instagram.

Internal approval as a big value

A value that recurred very frequently in the data is the importance of self-approval as a guiding principle for online behavior (R1–R10). Examples of self-approval being mentioned as the main value or criterion for sharing content include:

- If I don't support it myself, then I'm really not going to do it (R8).
- That I just stand behind it myself (R6).
- If I like it, if I think it's beautiful, that's enough (R4).

The value of self-approval was also described as a tool for maintaining realness or authenticity (R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R9). An example of this was stated by one creator as:

I don't make things that don't really suit me. Or that I think people will like, but actually they're not things I believe in. I think that's how I try to safeguard my realness online (R9).

Authenticity itself even appears to be seen as a core value in digital self-presentation. As one creator put it: "I find it most important that I stay close to myself..." (R7). An example of striving to be seen as authentic, and incorporating this into content choices, was illustrated by another creator:

I did recently post some kind of blooper or something. And then people just see... oh, she breaks. That's funny, right? Yeah, but then I do that more... I do that really for... that I think of... then people see a bit that I'm also really like that (R5).

The values of self-approval and authenticity also appeared to influence commercial practices. Creators mentioned that their willingness to collaborate with brands increased when there was a strong alignment between personal values and brand identity (R5, R8, R9, R10). One creator noted: "I don't work with brands I don't believe in" (R9). Another explained that when they genuinely supported a brand, they were more likely to accept a collaboration, even for a lower fee:

I would do it for a much lower fee than what I would ask for another company or something. Because I would support it (R8).

Follower count as a form of digital cultural capital and social value

Within the data, external approval also emerged as an important theme, with follower count identified as a significant indicator of social value and a key element in creators' online identity work and personal branding. It was often described as being "seen as cultural capital" (R1), symbolizing status, reach, and influence within the digital environment.

Several creators also referred to follower count as a gateway to professional or commercial opportunities (R2, R3, R4, R8, R9). One participant illustrated this point by describing how having more followers directly led to more personal and professional possibilities:

There are a lot of guys and girls around me now who are in that whole gravel scene. They're much more active on Instagram because they need to be - because if you have more followers, you get sponsors more easily (R2).

However, follower count was not only framed as a practical asset but also as a form of social validation, influencing how creators perceived both themselves and others (R4, R6, R7). One creator reflected:

I think it's cool that I have more than a thousand followers, for example. Because I might look at that in other people too. For example, if I see people with three hundred followers, I also think maybe you're a bit of a loser (R6).

In some cases, follower count became closely tied to self-worth and self-image. One creator reflected: "Oh, if my follower count stalls, does that mean I'm not good enough?" (R4). Others would even describe follower growth as addictive, offering a temporary boost in confidence and personal validation (R1, R4, R7).

These findings demonstrate how follower count functions as both symbolic and strategic capital within the digital identity economy.

Value of positive influential content

Another important value that emerged from the data is the desire to present a positive version of the self in online self-presentation (R1, R3, R5, R6, R7, R10). Many creators noted to avoid harmful or inappropriate content because "it could hurt someone or something" (R5). This includes "never posting nasty stuff or tearing people down or criticizing" (R3). The reason for this was said to be the fact that this behavior is bad for the personal brand as when creators "start to become a bit

unfriendly, then people drop you” (R5). Examples given by the creators of avoiding these negative habits where:

- Smoking is bad, and it doesn’t belong on Instagram (R1)
- I don’t feel the need to post that huge villa we stayed in on Crete (R3).

The value of using humor and positivity was also said to be used to shape an appealing online identity (R1, R5, R10). One creator described:

Of course I’m also a lot more than that, kind of... It’s not like I’m always only the funny me. But that is the side I mostly show on social media (R10).

Avoiding harmful content is not only a strategic choice to prevent backlash, but also a moral commitment. As Clarke and Holt (2010) argue, ethical reflection goes beyond merely following rules; it involves consciously shaping content that aligns with one’s personal values. In this light, content creators appear to express the importance of having a positive influence through content that reflects their identities.

Valuing content to be aesthetic for the eye

Some content creators also emphasized the importance of aesthetic appeal in their online presentation, highlighting its significant role in identity work and personal branding (R1, R6, R10). Content was not only regarded as a vehicle for self-expression but also as a carefully curated visual representation of the self. One creator, for example, explained how this value shaped their content decisions:

That’s why I post so little - I only post high-quality photos. And only when I have something to say, really (R2).

Visual attractiveness - particularly the way the self is portrayed - was also frequently mentioned as an important value in digital presentation (R1, R6, R7). As a result, many creators curated or edited their content to present themselves in the most favorable light, choosing images in which they felt they looked their best (R4, R6, R7, R10). One creator described this process:

I don't post every photo of myself. I do select from... Oh, I look good in that, then I post it (R7).

Thus, this value influences not only self-presentation but also the broader process of identity work.

Adjusting the online identity to the societal or professional position

Lastly, many creators emphasized to value to carefully curate their online self-presentation to reflect their (offline) societal and professional roles (R2, R3, R4, R5, R8, R9, R10). This often was expressed in making deliberate choices about what to share and what not to share, in order to respect professional boundaries.

Some creators explained how their offline professions came with strict boundaries regarding what can and cannot be shown online (R3, R4). Work related identity traits, or certain other personal traits, were said to be left out of the digital identity because of these boundaries. An example was described by a content creator:

At work, especially in the digital realm, I need to stay under the radar. I really shouldn't post anything. So in terms of work identity, I'm supposed to stay as invisible as possible - if I put it bluntly. In my private life, it can be fun or useful to post something or do a bit of identity work (R3).

Instagram and TikTok were also mentioned to be used as "a portfolio of work" (R8). When the choice is made to use Instagram or TikTok as a professional portfolio, the content - and thus the online self-presentation - is centered around one value and only a small part of the person's identity: showcasing their profession. An example of this was described by one creator:

Well, I'm more than just a cyclist. And on Instagram I only share cycling stuff. And it's usually fairly serious posts - like career updates. But I, as a person, am more than just my career. I share very little of my private life on Instagram (R2).

These examples show how the value of adopting one's content and online self-presentation to the (offline) professional role can play a role in the identity work online.

4.3 Reflective actions used to maintain a strategic yet value-driven digital identity

Axial codes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Aligning self-presentation and content with a predefined personal branding strategy• Using management feedback and reflection to refine personal branding strategies• Seeking social validation to confirm the success of one's online self-presentation

- Sustaining a value-driven digital identity through reflective content practices rooted in offline personal values
- Archiving or deleting content as a response to post-publication regret and as a way to manage online identity

Table 9. Axial codes of theme 3

In the context of identity work on TikTok and Instagram, creative content creators use reflective actions to shape and maintain a personal brand aligned with their values. These actions help safeguard authenticity, guide ethical decisions, and ensure their digital identity reflects their intentions. This theme, with four sub-themes, highlights how reflection supports a strategic yet value-driven online identity.

Alignment of self-presentation with a strategic predefined personal brand

A frequently mentioned reflective action was the reflection on the alignment of the online self-presentation and the predefined personal brand (R4, R5, R7, R9). Reflecting on how she presents her brand, one creator stated: “I do actively think about that” (R9). Another creator even provided an example illustrating how aligning self-presentation with a predefined strategy is essential for building an effective personal brand:

You post once on Monday night, then six times on Tuesday afternoon because you feel like it. Then maybe you post a 45-minute video - way too long for anyone to watch. You get hardly any views. Then a hot selfie that does well. But just because you felt like it. No one would follow you. Because that just doesn't work (R4).

This reflection took the form of both reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. Reflection-on-action was primarily observed in creators' tendencies to critically evaluate their past content - regularly reviewing and assessing what aligned with how they wanted to present themselves (R4, R5, R7). Reflection-in-action, on the other hand, was seen in their real-time critical awareness while engaging in online self-presentation, making conscious choices in line with their strategic branding plans (R5, R6, R9, R10). One creator gave a clear example of how she aligned her content strategy with her personal branding plan:

I could see that at four thirty my most followers were online. So then I always post at four thirty (R7).

Collaborative and reflective refinement through management input

In some cases, content creators reported working closely with managers or management teams who offered reflections and feedback on content decisions, self-presentation, and personal branding (R5, R9, R10). One creator, who uses social media primarily as a tool to promote her work, described how management input can support strategic self-presentation:

Sometimes I can be so consciously involved with social media. And sometimes I can just do something.... I do try a bit more. But sometimes... It's also really a tool for me. Instead of it really being my job. I also don't know if I would aspire too much to have a big social media... No, for me the work I do outside of that is really the work I like to do the most. And social media is a tool for that to show that. And that's why it's good to be strategic about it, but I can sometimes forget that a bit because it's not my main thing. But it would be good... I now have a manager and he has, for example, worked out a strategic plan for what I should do (R8).

Rather than viewing this collaboration as a rigid set of instructions, creators framed it as a reflective process that helped them refine their self-presentation and personal branding. Manager feedback was seen as a catalyst for self-reflection on identity work. As one creator explained:

My management often says: "You should do more personal things. It's good for your personal branding." Then I think no. What do people... What do you want to see from me? Am I going to do a day vlog? No one cares what I do in my day (R5).

This illustrates how identity work can be a dialogical process, in which creators engage with others to reflect on and fine-tune the alignment between their personal values and strategic presentation. The involvement of management does not necessarily diminish authenticity; instead, for many creators, it enhances intentionality and supports more thoughtful decision-making about which aspects of the self to make visible.

Seeking social validation

An other recurring pattern among content creators was the need for external confirmation to validate their online self-presentation (R4, R6, R7, R10). While many creators emphasized the importance of staying true to themselves, they also described seeking feedback from peers, friends, or role models to evaluate whether a post was aesthetically pleasing, strategically appropriate, or

aligned with their perceived identity. One creator shared an example of this form of reflection, as she would regularly asks her sister for input before posting:

To my sister, for example. That I just send that whole big series. And then... Then... I ask which one she likes best. Or something. Or if it's well edited (R6).

Social validation was not only sought directly but also through comparison with others (R4, R9, R19). These comparisons helped in calibrating their own self-presentation to what is perceived as effective self-presentation. One creator explained how she would look at other profiles for reflection on her personal brand:

Mostly by looking at someone else's profile, someone I thought had a good one for an actress, and I'd think: okay, this matches, this doesn't. And then I'd copy a little bit (R4).

Reactions from others also influenced how creators felt about and reflected on their digital identity, especially when they did not receive the validation they had hoped for. For instance, one creator reflected: "I think if, for example, friends of mine would say like... This isn't really you. Then I would find that really bad" (R7).

These examples illustrate how social validation - both explicit and implicit - plays a significant role in shaping creators' reflective actions and maintaining a digital identity that feels both strategic and authentic.

Archiving and deleting as tools for identity management

One common response among creators when content was no longer perceived as successful in their self-presentation was to archive or delete it (R1, R4, R5, R7, R8). Many creators considered this a valuable tool for managing their digital identity. One participant described how changes in her preferred self-presentation led her to remove older images that no longer fit this image: "I've archived quite a lot of that. For example, on Instagram, just photos from the past" (R8).

Such actions enable creators to continually revise their self-presentation, removing content that no longer aligns with their evolving identity. As another creator noted: "I do sometimes look back at Instagram and think, 'Oh, I don't really like that post anymore,' and then I delete it or something" (R1). This illustrates that digital identity is not fixed; rather, it is dynamic and open to revision, especially in response to shifts in personal beliefs, branding strategies, or audience interaction.

4.4 Platform logic and algorithmic pressure as shapers of digital identity work

Axial codes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shaping content and self presentation based on algorithmic preferences and visibility logic• Digital identity rarely reflects the full complexity of the offline self• Conforming to perceived norms to stay within the bounds of 'normal' online behavior• The accessibility of wide, anonymous reach via TikTok and Instagram• Framing Instagram/TikTok as a tool for self-documentation and memory• Platform affordances of TikTok and Instagram encourage fleeting and low-reflection content

Table 10. Axial codes of theme 4

On TikTok and Instagram, platform logic and algorithmic pressure play a key role in shaping the identity work of creative content creators. They influence ethical decisions, personal values, and reflective practices. Through six sub-themes, this theme illustrates how platform affordances and algorithmic systems shape not only content choices but also how creators perceive their own authenticity and digital selves.

Algorithmic awareness and strategic identity shaping

A key pattern that surfaced in the interviews is the awareness among creators of how platform algorithms determine visibility and engagement. The creator reported tailoring their content and self-presentation to meet the perceived preferences of the algorithm (R4, R5, R7, R8, R9, R10). One creator gave an example of this:

Now you notice a bit of okay, this works online.... Or this is then, sometimes I adjust that to that (R8).

This indicates that creators do not only present themselves but also perform strategic identity versions that align with visibility logic. This aligns with Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) notion of identity regulation, whereby individuals shape their sense of self based on external control mechanisms - in this case, the algorithm (pp. 623-625).

Aligned with the theory of van Dijck (2013), this form of identity work is was not said to be solely driven by self-expression, but is also seemed to be embedded in the desire to remain visible, relatable, and successful on the platform (R5, R8, R9). The performative alignment with algorithmic patterns in these examples shows how algorithms, as an overarching external factor, also influence

the decision-making process of posting. In doing so, they effectively impose an algorithmic filter over ethics, values, and reflection.

The partiality of digital identity

Another sub theme emphasized the discrepancy between creators' digital personas and their more complex offline identities (R1-R10). "Of course you are different with your family and friends, and you can never be 100 percent yourself online" one creator stated (R9). A few creators addressed how the affordances of digital formats can exacerbate this fragmentation (R2, R3, R6, R8). One example of this emerged in an interview, as follows:

(Resercher): Do you think the part of yourself that you do show, is genuinely you?

(R2): Yeah, but it's so little. It's just a tiny part. What have I really shown? Maybe a random story here and there. Mostly luck if something personal gets in. Not like, 'these are my hobbies outside cycling'. It even says in my bio: this account is for people who want to follow my cycling. It's clear. If you want to follow me as a cyclist, go ahead.

This echoes Watson's (2008) distinction between self-identity and social identity (p. 131), where the latter is constructed under the gaze of algorithmically mediated audiences. Thus, being in an online environment shaped by platform affordances appears to affect the completeness of self-presentation, as identity becomes partial - and consequently, also affects the completeness of ethical values and reflections.

The pursuit of "platform normalcy"

The content creators also noted a strong pressure to conform to normative expectations of what is considered acceptable or are desirable norms on platforms (R1, R6, R7). An example of this was described as followed:

Especially if you add someone right after you met them. If that's three months later, then it could be that they came up in 'favor' or something. But if you add the day after you meet someone who adds... Then it's really like I looked that person up. That's really intense (R7).

As Beech et al. (2012) claim, identity work intensifies in response to social and institutional pressures (p. 39). Platform normativity and platform normalcy can lead creators to adopt a normative online

persona, thereby influencing their ethical decision-making, reflections, and the formation of their values and identity in the digital realm.

Reach, anonymity, and platform visibility

The accessibility of a vast and largely anonymous audience was identified as both empowering (R5, R8, R9, R10) and constraining (R3, R4, R5, R10). On one hand, creators appreciated the opportunity to get more visibility and to be discovered by new audiences because “you don't have to spend a crazy amount of time on it to get your name to a very large audience very quickly” (R7). On the other, this faceless mass also changes the way of self-presentation and self expression. A content creator gave an example of this:

If you say something there and you say one word wrong, then you immediately get all of it on you. Whereas in real life maybe one or two people can say something about it. And then you can respond directly to it. And online you don't have that opportunity. So you really have to watch your words so carefully (R10).

Thus, an anonymous audience appears to encourage individuals to present their identity and values to a large audience more quickly. At the same time, however, it also prompts them to reflect more carefully. This dynamic can inhibit them from fully expressing themselves and their personal values, as well as from navigating ethical dilemmas openly — thereby influencing their identity work and personal branding

Instagram and TikTok as self-documentation tools

Several content creators described using Instagram or TikTok as a personal archive - a digital scrapbook of moments, thoughts, and experiences (R1, R2, R6). This aligns with Giddens' (1991) concept of self-identity as a narrative individuals construct through continuous reflection on their lived experiences (p. 53). One creator illustrated this by saying:

I have a really bad photo gallery, so I know that the photos I'll actually look back on are the ones I posted on Instagram (R1).

In this context, their content feed functions as a narrative tool, telling the story of the self. The documenting function of these platforms enables creators to construct a coherent digital identity over time, presenting what one participant referred to as ‘a big part of my life’ (R1). On these

platforms, this narrative is both individual and social - shaped not only by the creator but also mediated through interactions such as likes, comments, and shares. The fact that this narrative is socially shaped demonstrates how self-identity - the internal perception of who one is - and social identities — shaped by cultural and institutional norms (Watson, 2008, p. 131) - become intertwined. This illustrates how platform affordances influence the ways in which content creators reflect on themselves, their values, and the ethical decisions they make.

Fleeting and low-reflection nature of platform content

Despite efforts toward intentionality, creators noted that the fast-paced, short-form nature of TikTok and Instagram stories often discouraged deep reflection (R1, R3, R4). This phenomenon is pointed out by one content creator:

Social media is a fleeting medium. You scan things quickly, rarely read deeply, rarely really dig into topics or think carefully about your opinion before expressing it. You just throw it online. And that encourages thoughtless responses (R3).

The transient and consumable nature of content appears to diminish the perceived necessity for ethical reflection or critical self-awareness.

This dynamic reflects the tension Clarke and Holt (2010) described between performance and reflection. The digital environment encourages creators to act quick - post, trend, react - often at the expense of reflective thought. Although there appears to be some support for reflective actions embedded in the platform's affordances. One creator gave an example:

You also get quite often reminders of this, you posted a year ago (R8).

This example suggests that the fleeting nature of social media reduces the extent to which creators engage in reflection on ethics and values. Nevertheless, platforms do seem to incorporate certain features that subtly encourage users to reflect over time.

4.5 Audience influence in the performance of online identity

Axial codes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Re-evaluating self-presentation in response to audience feedback• The concept of context collapse playing a role in self-presentation• Reduced influence of others' opinions on self-presentation with increasing age

- Constructing self-image through online audience feedback
- Principle of audience awareness effecting authenticity in content
- Authenticity enhances follower engagement and connection
- Regularly updating content to align with evolving identity

Table 11. Axial codes of theme 5

Audience influence is another key factor shaping ethical decisions, personal values, and reflective actions. Through six sub-themes, this theme explores how audience perceptions and expectations impact creators' self-reflection and digital identity on TikTok and Instagram. While creators gain more agency over time, their identity work remains a continuous negotiation with audience feedback and expectations.

The effect of audience awareness on authenticity

Although creators expressed a strong desire to remain authentic, many acknowledged that being aware of their audience sometimes influenced their self-presentation and content choices (R1, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9). One creator described how audience awareness could pose a threat to authenticity:

Once people start reacting positively to something, and you want to keep that going, you're not being your authentic self anymore (R4).

As a response to this tension, some content creators explained how moments of reflection played a crucial role (R4, R8). One creator articulated this internal process as follows:

Am I doing this because I really like it? Or because I want to share it myself? Or am I doing this because I know that this will do well on the internet? Or am I doing this because it is a kind of part of promotion? (R8).

These reflections suggest that audience awareness can compromise authentic self-expression by prompting creators to consider others' expectations and reactions, potentially steering them away from their own values when navigating ethical dilemmas. At the same time, however, audience awareness appears to trigger reflection on authenticity, often in the form of questions like: 'I know this is what others want - but is this what I want?' Thus, while it can push creators toward inauthentic choices, it simultaneously fosters a degree of reflection on personal values and ethical considerations.

Authenticity as strategic tool

Authenticity, on the other hand, was also mentioned as a deliberate content strategy (R4, R5, R9). Several content creators described how inauthenticity could negatively impact audience engagement:

The moment you're making what people want, then people stop watching, because then it's just less good, because it's not coming from you, I think (R5).

To foster stronger engagement with their audiences, creators expressed a preference for honest, relatable content, stating that "the closer I stay to myself, the better it also lands" (R10). Thus, authenticity was not only upheld as a personal value but also actively employed as a strategic tool. In this sense, using authenticity as a tactic for audience engagement suggests that audience awareness can, in some cases, positively reinforce authentic self-presentation and navigation.

The role of context collapse in self-presentation

Having different audiences watching can also have an effect on identity work. The phenomenon of context collapse - where various social spheres merge into a single audience and force creators to navigate multiple audience expectations - was frequently mentioned as a complicating factor in content decisions (R1, R4, R6, R7). "If more people from different areas of your life follow you, you do become more critical of what you post" (R1). The awareness that posts are viewed simultaneously by friends, family, strangers, and potential brand partners appeared to heighten self-monitoring and reduce uninhibited self-expression. One participant described how they managed different levels of self-expression and reflection depending on the perceived audience:

I just like it when it fits together. With colors or with edits or something. But for example TikTok... where I have a private account, I really don't give a *. Because then I really do it for my friends. So then I just post funny videos. That's why I shielded my TikTok, so to speak. That it's just for my inner circles, so to speak... I just find that funny. And then I can just share jokes and stuff. Or post things, then I don't care that much. But more for the people outside... I don't really have to post anything (R6).

In this way, context collapse emerges as a core tension in digital identity construction, as for different audiences different values are important. One creator illustrated this by saying:

I would think like... Oh, I have a cigarette in that photo. I don't want to be seen like that. Because my mother follows it. And my father too (R6).

Context collapse thus fosters greater self-reflection, introduces a wider range of values that come into play, and necessitates more ethical considerations. This often results in a more curated and controlled form of self-expression.

The feedback loop: audience as mirror and a sharper

When content creators' audiences become active, this can also significantly impact their identity work. Several creators described how their self-image and confidence were shaped by audience reactions in the form of likes, views, and comments (R4, R5, R6, R7). For instance, "you might become more insecure if it has a few less likes" (R6).

Audience feedback - particularly through comments, likes, and unfollows - was not only interpreted as a measure of worth, but also as a trigger for re-evaluating self-presentation. One creator illustrated this dynamic:

I had an app that showed me who unfollowed me, so I could see. I'd think, 'Oh, so this person no longer finds me interesting. Ouch.' That was such a blow. And then I'd start guessing why. Was it because I posted too many selfies? Or too much about my education in my stories? (R4).

Audience feedback thus functions both as an indicator of self-worth and as a trigger for reflection. It influences how creators perceive themselves while simultaneously prompting them to reflect on how they present their values and navigate ethical choices in their online identity.

Evolving identity and the need for continual reassessment

Some content creators expressed a sense of obligation or pressure to keep their audiences updated on their authentic selves (R1, R4, R7, R8). When they had not posted in a while, they felt the need to share new content to maintain an accurate representation of their current identity (R1, R6, R7). Digital identity was frequently described as fluid - something that must be revisited and recalibrated over time (R4, R7, R9). As one creator reflected, this continuous evolution prompted ongoing reflection about what to share and what no longer felt representative:

I thought it was a really cute photo, but I also thought, That was so long ago (R1).

This aligns with Brown's (2017) understanding of identity work as adaptive and iterative (p. 298). To remain in alignment with one's evolving self, it becomes necessary to regularly update not only one's content but also the digital image - and therefore the public perception - that emerges from it.

This process is particularly significant in digital environments, where past posts remain permanently visible and may clash with current values or goals. One creator gave an example of this by describing how their shifting self-perception during a period abroad affected her content decisions:

If I were to look at those Berlin posts now, I was in a phase. But when I was in Berlin, I thought again, if I got a follower of... If someone from Berlin started following me, then I sometimes thought of... Oh, I feel like it doesn't match who I am here anymore. That's also why I posted such a darker photo, I think because I kind of identified myself more there. And less as the super colorful Utrecht student girl, so to speak (R7).

Audience awareness can thus foster a need for continual reflection and reassessment of the self and one's online values in order to present an up-to-date version of the self. This can be seen as a positive effect, as it supports creators in navigating ethical decisions as authentically as possible.

Reduced sensitivity to external opinions when growing older

"When you get older, it matters less what people think of you" (R3). Interestingly, some participants noted a change in how much they allowed audience opinion to influence their content and self image over time (R1, R4, R6, R7). With age and experience, they felt less pressure to conform. One content creator described:

I WAS even more driven by that or something. That maybe it was puberty, you know, also more insecure. But now I care a little less (R6).

This developmental shift in reflexivity appears to strengthen the creator's sense of authenticity by reducing overthinking reflective actions and instead reinforcing personal values. This, in turn, allowed them to navigate ethical dilemmas more freely and engage with their audience from a stronger sense of grounded self-awareness.

5. Conclusion

The previous chapter presented the findings of this research regarding which ethical decisions, values, and reflective actions play a role in the identity work and personal branding of content creators. But what do these findings reveal about how these factors play out in their respective context? And how can these findings be evaluated accordingly?

The qualitative analysis of the in-depth interviews revealed several general insights and six key themes: 1) the way ethical dilemmas and decisions play a role in the identity work and personal branding, as well as 2) the way personal values play a role in the identity work and personal branding, followed by 3) the way reflective actions play a role in the identity work and personal branding of creative content creators, and also 4) the role platform logic and algorithmic pressure play in the ethical navigation of digital identities, and then 5) the role audiences play in the ethical navigation of digital identities and concluded with 6) the finding that ethical decisions and self-presentation are continuously navigated between personal values and the influences of platform logic and audience.

This chapter evaluates these key findings and connects them to the academic literature discussed in Chapter Two. Furthermore, it addresses the limitations of this study and offers suggestions for future research. Ultimately, it aims to answer the central research question.

Ethical dilemmas faced by content creators

As expected, one of the most prominent ethical tensions that appeared in the data from the interviews revolves around balancing authenticity with commercialization. Brand collaborations provide income but can undermine authenticity, prompting ongoing reflection: does this campaign align with my values, and how does it fit the image my audience has of me?

Speaking up versus protecting one's reputation is another key dilemma. Creators often avoid commenting on sensitive or polarizing topics - even when these touch their own values - due to fear of backlash, negative audience relations or commercial risk.

Another tension concerns authenticity or success versus social impact. Creators are mindful of how their content might harm others, leading them to avoid involving others without consent or to question whether a joke or trend might be offensive. However, the pursuit of authenticity or viral success can sometimes clash with these boundaries.

There is also the dilemma of whether to fully embrace the role of being 'a brand'. The constant pressure to maintain visibility and deliver content aligned with a set persona can conflict with personal autonomy, enjoyment, and boundaries. As Sveningsson & Alvesson (2003) suggest, ethical decisions become existential choices: how do I stay true to myself in an environment demanding constant optimization, visibility, and growth?

In sum, ethical decision-making in digital identity work is not a one-time act but an ongoing negotiation between self-expression, commercial interests, and social responsibility. As Brown (2015) highlights, identity work inevitably involves reflecting on moral choices, asking: “Who do I want to be online?” and “What boundaries am I unwilling to cross?”

Values in Navigating Online Identities

The interviews also focused on values, and revealed that curating a value-driven online identity often occurs intuitively. Personal values serve as a compass guiding self-presentation. Internal approval consistently outweighed external factors and was considered the key to maintaining authenticity.

Authenticity itself emerged as a core value, influencing both minor and major decisions - from posting bloopers to rejecting brand deals that don't align. Yet, external validation, particularly through follower counts, remains an undeniable driver, perceived as digital currency reflecting social status and unlocking further growth.

Many creators actively aim to foster a positive, constructive identity. Avoiding harmful or negative content isn't just a strategy against backlash but also a moral commitment. Their content should contribute something meaningful - whether through humor, aesthetics, or vulnerability.

Aesthetics were also framed as a value, with visually curated content serving as a tool for qualitative self-representation. A carefully chosen image conveys who they are, what matters to them, and how they wish to be perceived.

Selective sharing was used as an extension of their offline professional roles. Creators made deliberate ethical choices about what aspects of life - work, family, identity - to show or omit, resulting in a curated digital self that aligns with their desired societal role.

Reflective actions for building a digital identity

Reflection proved essential in evaluating ethical decisions and aligning them with personal values (Clarke & Holt, 2010). A key pattern was ensuring self-presentation aligned with a predefined personal brand, through both reflection-in-action - while posting - and reflection-on-action - evaluating past content. Monitoring post timing or assessing content quality served both the algorithm and audience expectations.

These reflective practices were not purely individual. Manager input often functioned as an external mirror, fostering deeper reflection on content and branding. Rather than compromising authenticity, this often led to more intentional, integrity-driven self-presentation.

Feedback from friends, family, or peer comparisons was another reflective tool. Such input reinforced creators' decisions and prompted questions like: "Does this match who I am - or want to be - online?" This dependence on external validation also introduced vulnerability; negative responses often triggered reconsideration of previous choices.

Finally, archiving or deleting older content was a common strategy for maintaining a dynamic digital identity, allowing creators to adapt their online selves in line with personal growth and evolving values. In this way, online identity is not necessarily static but can evolve alongside personal growth, changing values, and ongoing reflections.

How platform logic and algorithmic pressure shape the navigation of digital identities

The interviews confirmed what Alvesson & Willmott (2002) predicted: platform algorithms and technical structures heavily influence creators' ethical navigation. Aligning content with algorithmic preferences to maximize visibility was a recurring strategy. Many creators experienced a significant gap between their online persona and their full offline identity, deliberately sharing only curated aspects that the platform rewards.

Subtle social norms within platforms also imposed pressure to behave according to what is deemed 'normal' or desirable. Informal platform rules shape what is acceptable to post.

The accessibility of a large, anonymous audience was a double-edged sword - offering rapid visibility but also amplifying caution. A single misstep or controversial remark can go viral instantly, unlike in offline contexts where consequences are localized.

Platform affordances on Instagram and TikTok enable self-documentation, functioning as a digital archive. While this supports identity continuity, it also means that reflections on identity are mediated by platform logic and audience reactions.

The fleeting nature of these platforms discourages deep reflection, favoring fast-paced production and consumption. However, features like "one year ago today" do prompt retrospective reflection, albeit belatedly.

In summary, algorithmic pressure and platform logic influence the weight of values, determine space for reflective actions, and ultimately shape how creators navigate ethical decisions and construct their digital identities.

How audience influence shapes the navigation of digital identities

Audience influence also plays a crucial role in shaping how creators act. A key pattern is that audience awareness - knowing others are watching, reacting, and judging - can reduce authenticity by

tempting creators to meet follower expectations. Yet, this same awareness also drives reflection. “Am I doing this because I want to, or because it performs well?” (R8).

Notably, authenticity is also seen as a strategic tool - “authenticity as brand” (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Authentic content tends to resonate more with audiences, fostering stronger connections and engagement. Audience awareness, therefore, can reinforce authenticity as much as it challenges it.

Context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011) emerged as another central tension. The merging of different social spheres - family, friends, colleagues, and strangers - forces creators to constantly balance diverse expectations and values, requiring careful reflection on both content and self-presentation.

The feedback loop of likes, comments, and unfollows profoundly shapes creators’ self-image. Positive feedback boosts confidence, while negative signals often trigger reevaluation of their identity choices.

Creators also reported feeling pressure to continually update their identity in response to personal change - by posting new content that reflects their current selves or archiving posts that no longer resonate.

Interestingly, several participants noted that audience influence diminished over time. Increased life experience and self-confidence made them less sensitive to audience opinions and more driven by their own values.

In short, the audience can serve both as a source of pressure and as a catalyst for reflection and value reinforcement. This ongoing tension between external expectations and internal values is a fundamental part of how ethical decisions, value orientations, and reflective practices unfold in the performance of online identity.

Ethical dilemmas, personal values and reflective actions in context

In the process of identity work and personal branding of creative content creators on Instagram and TikTok, several ethical dilemmas arise. To determine how to navigate these dilemmas, creators rely on their personal values.

Since identity work and personal branding are ongoing processes rather than fixed states (Brown, 2017, p. 298), this process of navigating and constructing one’s identity requires constant evaluation in order to maintain an accurate representation of the self. To enable this ongoing evaluation, creators engage in a set of reflective actions.

However, the navigation of ethical dilemmas is not an isolated process. It is significantly shaped by both platform logic and algorithmic pressure, as well as by audience awareness. These external forces influence how creators weigh and prioritize their personal values when making ethical

decisions. Similarly, the process of reflection - through the use of reflective actions - is also mediated by platform logic, algorithmic dynamics, and audience expectations.

To provide a clear illustration of how these factors play out within their respective context, the following framework visually represents these dynamics.

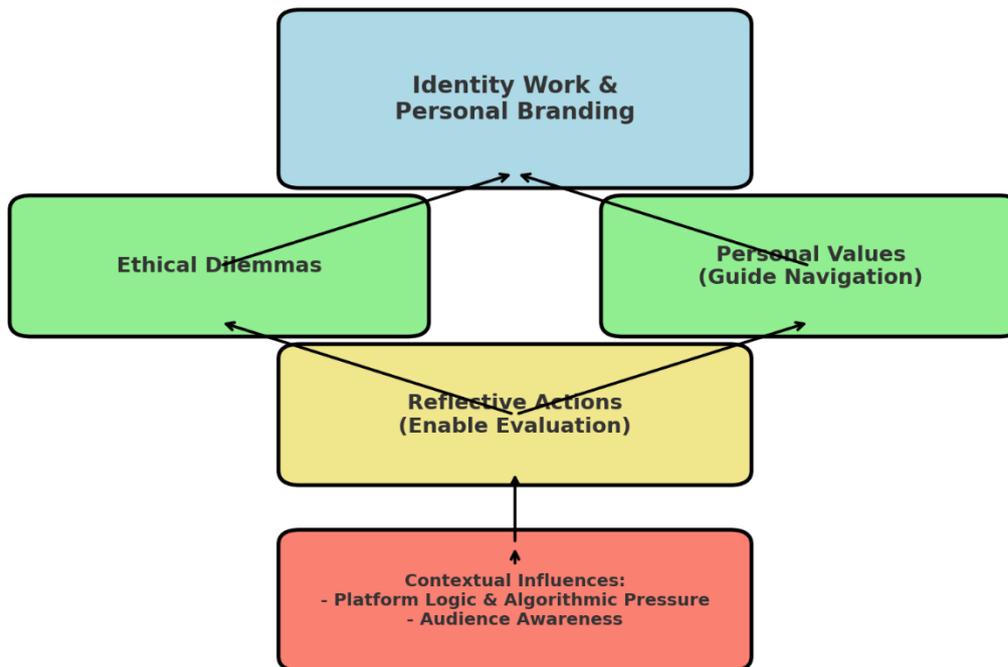


Figure 12. Visual representation of the framework

How these findings relate to current literature

The findings of this research both confirm and extend existing literature on identity work, personal branding, and the ethical navigation of creative content creators in the digital economy. Firstly, the strong presence of ethical dilemmas related to authenticity versus commercialization echoes Banet-Weiser's (2012) concept of "authenticity as brand", where authenticity is both a moral compass and a marketable asset. This paradox remains highly relevant in the context of TikTok and Instagram, where creators simultaneously strive for genuine self-expression and commercial viability. The tension between personal integrity and platform-driven visibility pressures reinforces Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) argument that identity regulation is both self-imposed and structurally enforced through platform logic.

The central role of values as a guiding principle further builds upon Schwartz's (1992) value theory, highlighting how creators continuously weigh their internal convictions against external expectations. Interestingly, while literature like Brown (2015) and Giddens (1991) emphasizes identity as a dynamic and narrative-driven process, this study uncovers that creators not only adapt their

narratives over time but also consciously curate which values to foreground depending on algorithmic affordances and audience reception. This adds a more pragmatic and context-specific layer to the theoretical understanding of value-based identity work.

Moreover, the emphasis on reflective actions as a mediating mechanism aligns with Schön's (1983) distinction between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, but extends it by demonstrating how reflection is deeply embedded in the everyday practices of social media navigation. The data suggests that reflection is not purely an internal cognitive process but often collective, relational, and shaped by peer feedback, manager input, and audience signals — which resonates with Raelin's (2021) concept of "leaderful practice" and reflective responsibility (Stahl, 2005).

A significant contribution of this research lies in how it contextualizes identity work within the platform economy. While scholars like Van Dijck (2013) and Cotter (2019) have discussed algorithmic influence broadly, this study shows how creators develop sophisticated forms of algorithmic literacy, balancing content optimization with self-expression. This finding nuances the existing literature by showing that while platform logic can constrain, it can also become a strategic tool — albeit one that introduces ongoing ethical negotiation.

The influence of the audience, particularly through context collapse (Marwick & Boyd, 2011), also mirrors earlier studies but is further elaborated in this research. The finding that audience pressure diminishes over time as creators grow more confident in their value systems offers a fresh perspective not widely discussed. This suggests a form of ethical resilience, where experienced creators navigate external pressures with increasing autonomy.

In sum, this study confirms the inherently paradoxical nature of authenticity, the commercial entanglement of identity work, and the mediating role of reflection — all key themes in existing literature. However, it contributes novel insights by empirically showing how platform algorithms and audience dynamics intricately shape the ethical, reflective, and value-driven practices of creators in real time.

Limitations of the study

This research is not without limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, identity work is a highly personal and sensitive topic. Despite efforts to create an open and comfortable interview setting, the possibility of socially desirable answers may have influenced the results. This is particularly relevant considering that some participants were acquaintances of the researcher, while others were not, which may have led to varying levels of openness and comfort during the interviews.

Secondly, the sample was not statistically representative, particularly in terms of gender distribution, with a ratio of 2 men to 8 women. Finding men who had relevant knowledge about this topic and were willing to participate proved to be very challenging. Additionally, the age range of the participants could have been more diverse. Finding individuals from older age groups who are active on Instagram or TikTok and possess sufficient knowledge about these platforms proved to be particularly challenging.

Furthermore, the study was limited to Dutch content creators. Conducting the research on a more international scale would have provided a broader understanding of the processes under investigation, as these dynamics are not confined to the Netherlands but occur globally. However, due to time constraints, expanding the research internationally was not feasible.

Finally, I, as the researcher, am aware of how my own positionality and background may have influenced the interpretation of the data. Nevertheless, I ensured that the analytical process was consistently applied across all interviews, using the same coding criteria to maintain reliability and rigor.

Further research

Future research could investigate how the number of followers influences the way content creators navigate ethical decisions, personal values, and reflective actions. This study suggests that creators with larger audiences may experience stronger commercial pressures and higher reputational risks, while those with smaller audiences might retain greater freedom to act in line with their personal values. A comparative analysis between micro-creators and high-profile influencers could reveal how audience size shapes the balance between authenticity, platform visibility, and ethical self-presentation.

Additionally, comparative research could investigate whether creators on different platforms (e.g., TikTok vs. YouTube vs. Instagram) experience and navigate ethical dilemmas differently, considering the unique platform logics, affordances, and audience structures.

Another valuable avenue would be to examine how content creators from different cultural or geographical contexts approach values and ethics in their identity work, as this study primarily focused on creators operating within a Dutch context.

Finally, longitudinal research could provide deeper insight into how creators' identity work, values, and reflective practices evolve over the lifespan of their careers - particularly in response to burnout, changing audience demographics, or shifts in platform culture.

Conclusion

The aim of this study has been to understand how creative content creators on TikTok and Instagram give meaning to and act upon their ethical responsibilities, personal values, and reflective choices when constructing, performing, reconsidering, adapting, and revising their digital identities. To answer the research question and guarantee an in-depth interpretation of the data gathered, ten interviews with different creative content creators have been conducted. The interview respondents were selected based on specific criteria to ensure that they had relevant experience and insights, enabling a rich exploration of the phenomenon. The theoretical framework, which combines concepts of identity work, personal branding, and the role of ethics, values, and reflective actions in digital spaces, provided the foundation for both designing the interviews and structuring the analysis process. Through this process, six key themes were identified that offer a comprehensive answer to the research question.

The underlying research question: *Which ethical decisions, values, and reflective actions play a role in the identity work and personal branding of creative content creators on TikTok and Instagram? And: how do these play out in their respective context?* can be answered in six steps:

First, ethical dilemmas are a constant part of identity work, as creators navigate tensions between authenticity, commercial interests, and reputational risks. These dilemmas are not isolated moments but an ongoing negotiation embedded in their online presence.

Second, personal values serve as a key compass in shaping digital identities, with internal approval often prioritized over external validation - though follower growth and visibility remain influential factors.

Third, reflective actions, such as evaluating past content or aligning with personal branding strategies, help creators manage ethical challenges and ensure their online identity remains both authentic and strategic.

Fourth, platform logic and algorithmic pressure strongly shape creators' decisions, pushing them to adapt content to what algorithms reward, which impacts both ethical choices and self-presentation.

Fifth, audience influence functions as both a source of pressure and reflection, where feedback can challenge authenticity but also reinforce creators' commitment to their values.

Sixth, creators continuously navigate the balance between their internal values and the external pressures of platform algorithms and audience expectations, making digital identity work a dynamic and never-ending process of adaptation and ethical decision-making.

To conclude, the identity work and personal branding of creative content creators on TikTok and Instagram is an ongoing balancing act, where ethical decisions, personal values, and reflective

practices are constantly negotiated in response to both internal convictions and external pressures of platform algorithms and audience expectations.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Consent Form

CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH

For questions about the study, contact:

Charlotte Vermeulen, 741034

741034cv@student.eur.nl

(+31) 06 146 12 549

Description

You are invited to participate in a study for my Master's thesis. The aim of this research is to gain insight into how creative content creators in the digital economy - specifically on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram - build their online identity and personal branding, and what role ethical considerations and personal values play in this process.

By participating in this study, you agree to take part in an interview. The questions in this interview will generally relate to your creative process, how you position and present yourself on social media, which values and beliefs you find important, and to what extent you consciously reflect on these aspects.

Unless you prefer not to be recorded, I will use a voice recorder to capture the interview. These recordings will be used solely for research purposes and will be treated confidentially.

You are always free to skip any question or stop participating at any point during the interview.

Since my Master's program is in English, the interview questions are prepared in English. However, if you feel more comfortable speaking in Dutch, that is absolutely possible.

Where possible, the interview will take place face-to-face in a quiet setting. If the interview takes place via Zoom, you will be asked to be in a quiet space where you can speak freely and without distractions.

Risks and benefits

As far as I am aware, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. Yet, you are free to decide whether I should use your name or other identifying information such as your gender, age or nationality in the data processing. Upon your request I can ensure these details remain anonymous.

Time involvement

Your participation in this study will take between 30-50 minutes. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

Payments

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

Data collection and retention

During the interview, the following personal data will be collected from you: audio recordings, occupation, sentiments about / feelings about / opinions about ethics, values or reflective actions when building you identity and brand on TikTok an/or Instagram.

Your data will be retained for a minimum of 5 years. I retain the data so that other researchers have the opportunity to verify that the research was conducted correctly.

Participants' rights

If you have decided to accept to participate in this research, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer any particular question(s). If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

Contacts and questions

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of the study, you may contact – anonymously, if you wish – Dr. S. Ove Horst, my thesis supervisor: Horst@eshcc.eur.nl

Do you have a complaint or concerns about your privacy? Please email Charlotte Vermeulen 741034cv@student.eur.nl , or visit www.autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl. (T: 088 - 1805250)

Signing the consent form

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you do not need to sign this form. In order to minimize risk and protect your identity you may prefer to consent orally, this will be asked at the start of our interview, thus, our oral consent will be sufficient.

I give consent to be audiotaped during this study:

Name

Signature

Date

I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study:

Name

Signature

Date

Appendix B: Codes

Selective codes and axial codes

<i>Selective code</i>	<i>Axial Codes</i>
Navigating ethical dilemmas and brand pressures in digital identity work	Avoiding controversial topics to prevent negative comments and reputational damage
	Reflecting on the potential impact of one's posts on the audience
	The perceived pressure and expectations tied to personal branding and commercialization
	The tension between ethical action and maintaining a stable online identity
	Commercialization and brand building is effecting authentic presentation of the self
	Negotiating digital ethics through consent and interpersonal responsibility
	Making ethical choices in brand collaborations to preserve personal integrity
	Options in commercial gain shaping self-presentation

<i>Selective code</i>	<i>Axial Codes</i>
Curating a value-aligned and socially conscious personal brand	Adjusting online expression based on one's societal position or status
	Choosing not to disclose certain personal elements in digital self-presentation
	Willingness to collaborate increases when personal and brand alignments are stronger
	Prioritizing content quality as a core value in online self-presentation
	Valuing self-approval as the main criterion for sharing content
	Prioritizing authenticity as a core value in digital self-presentation
	Prioritizing visual attractiveness in digital self-presentation
	Shaping content to align with a desired online image
	Using humor and positivity to shape an appealing online identity
	Avoiding harmful or inappropriate content to stay true to personal and social values

<i>Selective code</i>	<i>Axial Codes</i>
Reflective actions used to maintain a strategic yet value-driven digital identity	Archiving or deleting content as a response to post-publication regret and as a way to manage online identity
	Seeking social validation to confirm the success of one's online self-presentation
	Aligning self-presentation and content with a predefined personal branding strategy

	Using management feedback and reflection to refine personal branding strategies
	Sustaining a value-driven digital identity through reflective content practices rooted in offline personal values

<i>Selective code</i>	<i>Axial Codes</i>
Platform logic and algorithmic pressure as shapers of digital identity work	Shaping content and self presentation based on algorithmic preferences and visibility logic
	Digital identity rarely reflects the full complexity of the offline self
	Conforming to perceived norms to stay within the bounds of 'normal' online behavior
	The accessibility of wide, anonymous reach via TikTok and Instagram
	Framing Instagram/TikTok as a tool for self-documentation and memory
	Platform affordances of TikTok and Instagram encourage fleeting and low-reflection content

<i>Selective code</i>	<i>Axial Codes</i>
Audience influence and reflexivity in the performance of online identity	Authenticity enhances follower engagement and connection
	Reduced influence of others' opinions on self-presentation with increasing age
	The concept of context collapse playing a role in self-presentation
	Follower count as a form of digital cultural capital and social value
	Re-evaluating self-presentation in response to audience feedback
	Regularly updating content to align with evolving identity
	Constructing self-image through online audience feedback
	Principle of audience awareness effecting authenticity in content

Axial codes and open codes

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Archiving or deleting content as a response to post-publication regret and as a way to manage online identity	Archiving pictures as solution for regret on pictures, Archiving irrelevant content, Deleting as solution after reflection, Regret over past posts
<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Shaping content and self presentation based on algorithmic preferences and visibility logic	Adjusting content for algorithmic success, Algorithm affecting appearance, Algorithm affecting view count, Algorithmic awareness when posting content, Not caring about the algorithm, Posting more reactions on other people's content is good for the algorithm, Struggling with the algorithm when self-promoting, Using interaction to boost reach, Using the algorithm for strategic self-promotion, Value shift caused by changes in algorithm working, You do have the algorithm and you have to post a few times a week
<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Adjusting online expression based on one's societal position or status	Focus on work-related content, Less boundaries in identity work online when no longer working, Making decisions on whether to do it full time or not, Only posting stuff for personal matters in identity work, Posting about your professional self depends on the profession you have, Privacy and safety concerns controlling what to post of the self, Risk of an online profile affecting the identity work online, Social media as a tool for professional identity, Using Instagram for house searching, Online identity as entertainer, Platform as a tool for creative self expression, Perceives herself as an artist and entertainer, Perceives herself as multiple things online
<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Avoiding controversial topics to prevent negative comments and reputational damage	Not joining of activism online, Sharing opinions is bad for branding, Avoidance of personal content, Avoidance of political content, Avoiding big debates, Avoiding controversial associations, Avoiding difficult or boring content, Avoiding online conflicts, Avoiding political topics as content creator, Avoiding political/unethical dilemma's because of lack of impact
<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Reflecting on the potential impact of one's posts on the audience	Awareness of influence, Hopes to inspire people through shared artistic process, Importance of positive affect and self presentation of having fun, Sees performance as socially relevant, Posting content containing positive value's for impacting others, Positive influence as intent without hatefulness

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Seeking social validation to confirm the success of one's online self-presentation	Asking conformation from people in the surrounding as reflection, Desire for social approval, Emotional response to social validation, Reflective action: asking others for validation of the content, Reflective action: comparing with others, Reflective action: opinion of friends or people looking up to matters

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Authenticity enhances follower engagement and connection	Authenticity leads to better engagement, Authenticity leads to better engagement, Authenticity leads to better engagement, Personal posts are being liked easier

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Choosing not to disclose certain personal elements in digital self-presentation	Low self-presentation online because of fear of identity theft, Not sharing anything from the private life, Avoidance of online exposure of work related subjects, Ethical dilemma: when posting the content will belong to the platform, Reflection on bikini photo's, Selective self presentation for what you want to show online

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Willingness to collaborate increases when personal and brand alignments are stronger	Being selective about brand fit, Collaborating with brands that fit the personality or are being liked, Matching collaborations to personality, Not working with brands they don't believe in, Refusing reality TV because it does not fit, When supported, less money is required in collaborations, Decision: payroll versus fitting collaborations

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Digital identity rarely reflects the full complexity of the offline self	Big consistency between online and offline self, Difference between online and offline self, Online vs offline boundaries in posting/saying, Only showing a small part of the self online, Same role online and offline, just a better version of the role, Separation of the Online-self and offline-self

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Reduced influence of others' opinions on self-presentation with increasing age	Caring less about other peoples opinions when growing older, Caring less about reactions of others when getting older, Caring less about follower count when you get older, Shift from perfectionism to realism in self presentation, When you get older, it matters less what people think of you, Younger people are way more active

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
The perceived pressure and expectations tied to personal branding and commercialization	Commercial definition of content creation, Connecting Content creators to marketing purposes, Dilemma, effort versus deals, Dilemma: feeling awkward versus deals, Not

	wanting to become a brand because of constant active thinking about it, Not wanting to deal with the 'you owe me a post' thing, Not wanting to feel pressured to post for deals, Perception of content creators being strict to a strategic, Personal branding needs to be enjoyable and sustainable, Pressure of having to perform, Definition of a personal brand in connection with income, Rejecting brand label because of unstrict consistency in posting, Rejecting label content creator, Rejection of 'brand' image
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<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
The concept of context collapse playing a role in self-presentation	Context collapse, Depending what kind of content you post by who follows you, Identity as contextual, Conscious of different audiences per platform, Online form of presence depending on followers (amount and who), Platform differentiation

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Prioritizing content quality as a core value in online self-presentation	Cool image as a value when posting, Minimalist content strategy, Not wanting to post non interesting content, Perfectionistic self-presentation, Quality of content as reflection, Value of visual aesthetics

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Follower count as a form of digital cultural capital and social value	Addictive nature of growth, Ambivalent toward followers metrics, Big following online gives more opportunities, Follower count above thousand is good, Follower count indifference, Follower count showing the quality of the profession, Follower count tells the people you don't know the first thing about you personality, Follower sensitivity, Followers online as cultural capital, Growth is reluctantly seen as important, Having a average amount of followers (as the people in the surrounding) make you normal, Not being driven by follower analytics, Self-confidence comes from follower count, Self-worth tied to followers metrics, Value: being found likeable gives a lot of opportunities online, Follower boosts are also a boost for the ego

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Valuing self-approval as the main criterion for sharing content	Doing what you like online, I post it because I like it myself, Importance of liking the content yourself, Only posting to show you liked something, Safeguarding realness by only producing self suiting content, Value when posting: I have to like it, Value: only posting when it makes you happy, Value: only posting when supported, Value: Posting because you like it yourself, Value: posting what you like yourself online, Staying authentic by posting what you like or think is funny

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Re-evaluating self-presentation in response to audience feedback	Selective self presentation for what works online, Positive reactions causing more of this selective content, Learning from negative feedback on controversial topics, Sexualization dilemma, Reflective actions on Instagram caused by follower loss, Positive reactions on self-presentation, Reflecting on the self because of reactions of others
<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Prioritizing authenticity as a core value in digital self-presentation	Dislike of inauthenticity, Integrity over trends, Rejecting fake personas, Striving for realness, Striving for self-alignment, Value: Sincerity in representation, Value: staying close to yourself, Wanting to share what is important to them, Wanting to stay authentic at all times, Wanting to stay real online, Wanting to stay true to the self, Posting content to show followers what you really are like, Rejection of trends

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Aligning self-presentation and content with a predefined personal branding strategy	Strategic post timing, Actively reflecting on a strategic plan, Being selective with collaborations for strategic self-presentation, Deleting because content was bad for the strategic plan, Not having a strategic posting plan makes it impossible to 'work', Selective self presentation for strategics in personal branding, Strategic differentiation, Strategic self-presentation to distinguish the personal brand, You have to see yourself as a brand to present yourself in a certain way, Making more inclusive content to get more views

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Conforming to perceived norms to stay within the bounds of 'normal' online behavior	Avoiding desperation in digital interactions, Not wanting to be cringe, Value: Not following someone the day after you've met to avoid desperation, Value: not posting weird or bizarre things, Pressure of posting something when everyone posts something

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Regularly updating content to align with evolving identity	Phase-based identity expression, Value in personal branding: renewing yourself to keep people engaged, Value: wanting to stay consistent in posting, Wanting to keep your self up to date

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
The tension between ethical action and maintaining a stable online identity	Challenging social media norms, Dilemma: public understanding of professions versus personal risk, Dilemma: using your platform for ethical discussions vs chance of getting bad reactions, Getting less positive reactions when people don't identify with the post, Value:

	pushing the edge a bit, Wanting to change the importance of social presence
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<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Prioritizing visual attractiveness in digital self-presentation	Editing content to get more likes, Instagram: sharing what you do, and showing pictures you look good in, Only good qualities in self-presentation on social media, Seeing Instagram as a place where you present yourself well, Selective self presentation, only beautiful pictures, Value of wanting people to think you are pretty, Value: wanting to look pretty in content, Selective authenticity based on looks in the photo

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Shaping content to align with a desired online image	Reflective action: not wanting to look like someone who always travels, I naturally want to think things through. And that doesn't really match, Self branding in showing that you do good for the world, Self-description as social and outdoors, Self presentation as social, happy and outdoors, Value when posting: having fun, Wanting to be seen as someone who like the little things, Wanting to come across as paying a lot of attention, Not wanting to be seen as a jerk online, Online visibility depending on social context, Value in self presentation: having a lot of friends, Leaving reaction out because of indecisiveness

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Constructing self-image through online audience feedback	Unimportance of likes, Not caring about other people's opinion, Not looking at the like metrics to not become more insecure, Reflection: checking who liked the post, Reflective action: checking if boys they dated liked the post, Reflective action: worthiness of post is being depended by the reactions of others, Self image being boosted by reaction of others, Self image depends on feedback from others online, Self image management via content, Self image online based on reactions of other people, Social media can conflict the self-image, Mile stone as an ego boost

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Using management feedback and reflection to refine personal branding strategies	Management helping with strategic self-promotion, Reflecting with management, Reflective action: looking at statistics with management, Reflective action: management supporting more personal content

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Using humor and positivity to shape an appealing online identity	Maintaining positivity in content, Positivity as important value in content, Only posting fun or funny things, Performing certain traits online: humor, Positive reactions on funny self-presentation, Using humor in identity

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
The accessibility of wide, anonymous reach via TikTok and Instagram	Easier access to a bigger audience now a days, Ethical decision: bigger audience means more online exposure, Ethical dilemma: everyone can anonymously say what they want, Online boundary: big audiences, TikTok: large audience for little money, Valuing real connections online, Not communicating with strangers

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Framing Instagram/TikTok as a tool for self-documentation and memory	Instagram as an overview of someone's life Instagram as non professional, for fun, Using Instagram feed as an memory book, Using Instagram for personal purpose, Posting content with the intent to leave it up there for a long time, Actively choosing not the become a brand, Avoiding commercialization, Value for posting: wanting friends to see things, Sharing content with the people surrounding

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Platform affordances of TikTok and Instagram encourage fleeting and low-reflection content	Reflective approach to social media feature of it always staying online, Posting according to expectations of the platform, Platform encouraging reflection on previous posts It's not a platform that encourages deep thought, Lack of ethical awareness, Lack of reflection because of short posts, Social media is often too fast and too shallow, Social media being fleeting is bad for the self presentation, Social media as stressful and toxic, To much reflecting makes it abstract

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Commercialization and brand building is effecting authentic presentation of the self	Authenticity versus commercialization, Brand building stops authenticity, Brand struggle: personal preference vs audience preference, To many collaborations can over rule the real identity, Commercialization critique, Authenticity gets challenged by collaborations, Growth of authenticity with more collaboration offers, Sponsorships are a threat to self presentation

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Principle of audience awareness effecting authenticity in content	Audience reaction affecting authenticity, Reflective action: do people want to see this side of me?, Audience awareness in deciding what to post, Audience expectations, Audience preference effecting authenticity, Changing the self presentation online to keep the followers happy, Impact of others opinions matters, Reflecting on audience perception, Self-presentation based on what is wanted from the audience, Self-presentation depending on audience, Self-presentation gets based on what you like to see yourself in others, Value of authenticness being

	challenged by opinion of others, Value: Only posting when it's expected people will be interested, Consideration before every post
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<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Sustaining a value-driven digital identity through reflective content practices rooted in offline personal values	Active self-reflection, Posts aligned with personal value, Reflective action: looking back on the posted content, Reflecting for yourself, Reflecting on posts if you still stand behind the post, Reflection: do I do this because I like it or because I know it will work well, Reflective action: is this strategic right for me?, Reflective action: reflecting on what was posted in the evening, Respect for personal values, Using own norms and values to decide whether to post or not, Values-based decision-making, Reluctance to become a brand worth money, person is not buyable

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Negotiating digital ethics through consent and interpersonal responsibility	Ethic: not filming people without consent, Support from friends in shared content, value: asking consent from others, Value: asking consent from others

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Avoiding harmful or inappropriate content to stay true to personal and social values	Ethical boundary: cigarettes don't belong on Instagram, Ethical boundary: insult-proof content, No bragging, Value: bad behavior shouldn't be normalized, Value: not tearing people down or criticizing, Value: Smoking is private, Being unfriendly is bad for personal branding, Not wanting to hurt people online

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Making ethical choices in brand collaborations to preserve personal integrity	Ethical sponsorship choices, not promoting something that's not ethical, Refusing unethical brands, Rejecting unethical brand associations, Rejecting unethical brand associations

<i>Axial Code</i>	<i>Open Codes</i>
Options in commercial gain shaping self-presentation	Commercialization as a driver for posting, Earning money as a apologist for online behavior, Enjoying content creation as a job, Starting for fun, wanting to grow when money comes in, Using TikTok for marketing purpose, Kelly as a brand, Value of income in collaborations, Values in personal branding: money, getting job offers, being a though leader

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Questions - English

Topic 1: Being a creative content creator

1. How do you see yourself in the digital economy? As an artist/entrepreneur/activist/entertainer e.g.?
2. Do you consider yourself an creative content creator?
3. How do you experience being an creative content creator?
4. How important is it for you as an creative content creator to keep growing on social media? In followers and in income?

Topic 2: Identity work

5. How do you see yourself?
6. Do you sometimes have to perform different roles? When is that the case?
7. In what way does the representation/image of yourself change in online settings?
8. How has the image of yourself changed the last few years?
9. What role does being an online figure play in the development of your identity?
10. What does being authentic on social media mean to you?
11. Have there been moments when it was hard to stay true to yourself online?
12. What tools do you use to present yourself how you want to be perceived?

Topic 3: Personal branding

13. Do you consider yourself as a brand?
14. How do you feel about “putting yourself out there” and becoming a “brand”?
15. Are there challenges when becoming a brand? How do you manage these challenges?
16. Do you actively think about how you present yourself as a brand online?
17. How do you differentiate yourself from other content creators?
18. What role does storytelling play in your content?
19. What do you do to stay consistent in your style or message?

Topic 4: Reflective actions when posting online

20. Do you take time to look back on your creative process or decisions after posting something?
If so, how?

21. Do you ever consciously reflect on the impact your content has on your audience? Can you give an example?
22. Have you ever posted something you later regretted? What did you do afterward?
23. Are there moments when you reflect with others on what you do online?
24. In what ways do you learn from your experiences on social media?
25. Do you have any personal values or boundaries that you always try to stick to?
26. Have you ever adjusted your content or behavior based on what you thought your audience or the algorithm wanted? Can you give an example?
27. Do you have any personal routines or habits for evaluating your online presence?
28. Do you think creators have enough space or tools to reflect critically on their own practices? Why or why not?

Topic 5: Ethical decisions & values when posting online

29. What values are important to you in what you choose to share?
30. Have you ever turned down a collaboration or trend because it didn't align with your values?
31. How do you deal with sensitive topics or controversial trends?
32. How do you experience the responsibility that comes with your reach or influence?
33. What do you see as the biggest ethical challenge in content creation today?
34. How do you decide what to share and what not to share on TikTok or Instagram?
35. How important are statistics for your choices as a creator?
36. Have you ever felt conflicted between staying authentic and doing what's popular or expected?
37. Do you feel pressure to compromise your values in order to stay visible or successful?
38. How do you handle sponsorships or brand collaborations that come with conditions or expectations?
39. Have you ever called out or distanced yourself from unethical practices in the creator community?
40. What role do you think content creators should play in shaping ethical standards on platforms like TikTok and Instagram?

Interview Questions - Dutch

Thema 1: Een creatieve content creator zijn

1. Hoe zie jij jezelf binnen de digitale economie? Als kunstenaar/ondernemer/activist/entertainer, enzovoorts?
2. Zie jij jezelf als een creatieve content creator?
3. Hoe ervaar jij het zijn van een creatieve content creator?
4. Hoe belangrijk is het voor jou als content creator om te blijven groeien op social media - in aantal volgers of in inkomsten?

Thema 2: Identiteitswerk

5. Hoe kijk je naar jezelf?
6. Moet je soms verschillende rollen aannemen? Wanneer is dat het geval?
7. Op welke manier verandert jouw zelfbeeld of zelfrepresentatie in online omgevingen?
8. Hoe is jouw zelfbeeld de afgelopen jaren veranderd?
9. Welke rol speelt het zijn van een online figuur in de ontwikkeling van jouw identiteit?
10. Wat betekent 'authentiek zijn' op social media voor jou?
11. Zijn er momenten geweest waarop het moeilijk was om trouw te blijven aan jezelf online?
12. Welke middelen gebruik je om jezelf te presenteren zoals jij gezien wilt worden?

Thema 3: Personal Branding

13. Zie jij jezelf als een merk?
14. Hoe voel jij je bij het idee om jezelf 'zichtbaar te maken' en een merk te worden?
15. Tegen welke uitdagingen loop je aan in het worden van een merk? Hoe ga je daarmee om?
16. Denk je actief na over hoe je jezelf online als merk presenteert?
17. Hoe onderscheid jij jezelf van andere content creators?
18. Welke rol speelt storytelling in jouw content?
19. Wat doe je om consistent te blijven in je stijl of boodschap?

Thema 4: Reflectieve acties bij het posten online

20. Neem je de tijd om achteraf terug te kijken op je creatieve proces of keuzes? Zo ja, hoe?
21. Denk je wel eens bewust na over de impact die jouw content heeft op je publiek? Kun je daar een voorbeeld van geven?
22. Heb je ooit iets gepost waar je later spijt van had? Wat deed je toen?
23. Zijn er momenten waarop je samen met anderen reflecteert op wat je online doet?

24. Op welke manier leer jij van je ervaringen op social media?
25. Heb je persoonlijke waarden of grenzen waar je je altijd aan probeert te houden?
26. Heb je ooit je content of gedrag aangepast aan wat je dacht dat je publiek of het algoritme wilde? Kun je daar een voorbeeld van geven?
27. Heb je persoonlijke gewoontes of routines om je online aanwezigheid te evalueren?
28. Denk je dat content creators genoeg ruimte of middelen hebben om kritisch te reflecteren op hun eigen praktijken? Waarom wel of niet?

Thema 5: Ethische keuzes en waarden bij het posten online

29. Welke waarden vind jij belangrijk in wat je deelt?
30. Heb je ooit een samenwerking of trend geweigerd omdat het niet bij je waarden paste?
31. Hoe ga je om met gevoelige onderwerpen of controversiële trends?
32. Hoe ervaar jij de verantwoordelijkheid die gepaard gaat met je bereik of invloed?
33. Wat zie jij als de grootste ethische uitdaging in contentcreatie vandaag de dag?
34. Hoe bepaal jij wat je wel en niet deelt op TikTok of Instagram?
35. Hoe belangrijk zijn statistieken (likes, views, shares) voor jouw keuzes als maker?
36. Heb je ooit een conflict ervaren tussen authentiek blijven en doen wat populair of verwacht is?
37. Voel je druk om je waarden los te laten om zichtbaar of succesvol te blijven?
38. Hoe ga je om met samenwerkingen of sponsorcontracten waarbij bepaalde voorwaarden gelden?
39. Heb je je ooit uitgesproken tegen of afstand genomen van onethische praktijken binnen de content creator-community?
40. Welke rol zouden content creators volgens jou moeten spelen in het vormgeven van ethische standaarden op platforms als TikTok en Instagram?

Appendix D: AI Declaration Statement

Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

Student Information

Name: Charlotte Vermeulen

Student ID: 741034

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000

Supervisor Name: Dr. Sven-Ove Horst

Date: 26-06-2025

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- ~~Writing improvements, including~~ grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically [Name of the AI Tool(s) or Framework(s) Used], in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: [digital signature]

Date of Signature: [Date of Submission]

Extent of AI Usage

I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

Ethical and Academic Integrity

I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to

distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'C. M. A. V.', written over a horizontal line.

Date of Signature: 24-6-2025