

Decolonizing creativity in the digital era

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This paper explores the importance of decolonizing creativity in the digital era within the context of the platformized creator economy. We argue that technology has largely been designed for Western audiences by Western audiences, thereby overlooking an enormous segment of global Internet users who exist outside of the Global North. To take a truly inclusive approach to design research, it is imperative to consider local impacts and vernacular realities of designed platforms. Therefore, we share the results of fieldwork conducted with young people in India to produce a non-Western, decolonial perspective on digital creativity and algorithmic cultures. In sharing these findings, we also introduce a framework for other scholars to use when synthesizing globally-minded research on digital creativity: Creativity As... Access, Identity, Expression, and Data. In sharing deep insights into local realities pertaining to these topics, this paper contributes to ongoing discourse surrounding digital creativity and algorithmic cultures by offering a non-Western perspective. We compare these results with relevant findings in the West to reveal creative universalisms as well as unique local cultural needs. Through the latter, we highlight the importance of designing platforms with relevant audiences in mind and considering local vernacular realities when making design decisions.

Keywords: *creativity; India; creator economy; platformisation*

1 Introduction

Technology, to date, has largely been designed for Western audiences by Western audiences. In recent years, the design research community has begun to realize that the field disproportionately represents “WEIRD” (white, educated, industrialized, rich, and developed) audiences and experiences. Though design research has predominantly focused on such audiences, the increasing plurality of Internet users (Meeker, 2019) exists outside of the Global North. When design decisions are made, evaluated, and implemented in the context of Western norms, an enormous segment of the global audience is overlooked.

In the decades since the onset of the Internet, there have been recurring idealizations of “user-generated content,” which purports to give expressive, political, and social power to Internet users.



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Indeed, Web 2.0 and the sharing economy were founded on principles of open sharing, democratizing creativity, and user empowerment. Recently, however, scholars have realized that this perspective lacks a nuanced consideration of who is able to generate and share content and how, overlooking various hierarchies and imbalances that are actually reinforced—rather than eradicated—by algorithmic platforms. Therefore, in the last decade, numerous scholars have begun to critique the power asymmetries of platform economics, which have been revealed as precarious, biased, exclusionary, and normative.

At the same time, these platform economics have enabled a “creator economy,” by which certain creators are able to monetize audio-visual or visual content that they share on platforms. These platforms have two primary mechanisms that mediate the creator economy: their user interface and their underlying “black box” algorithms. We posit that— as neither the interface nor the algorithms have been designed for or by non-Western audiences—the design of both the platform and the algorithm are reinforcing Western norms of creativity. In this way, the creator economy’s algorithmic platforms are “colonizing” creativity, just as sharing platforms have been previously shown to engage in “data colonialism” (Couldry & Meijas, 2019). In this research, we aim to decolonize design research into digital creativity.

Through fieldwork in India, this paper offers a non-Western, decolonial perspective to the ongoing discourse surrounding digital creativity and algorithmic cultures. To take a truly inclusive approach to design research, it is imperative that we consider the local impacts and vernacular realities of designed platforms, particularly as they form the basis of new labour models, such as the creator economy. As we have written previously (Arora, 2019; Herman, 2023), when platforms are not designed with relevant audiences in mind, they risk removing opportunities from their most vulnerable users. With this paper, we encourage other researchers in the field to examine their Western biases and consider conducting fieldwork with the Global Majority so as to avoid reinforcing Western perspectives that do not accurately reflect the global digital experience. To this end, we provide a multi-part framework for examining creative labour outside of the West, and we situate our own findings within this model. We then leverage this framework to identify “universalisms” of creative labour and to highlight unique considerations for precarious creative labour in non-Western contexts.

2 A global perspective on digital creativity

In 2020, Forbes heralded a breakthrough shift from the “attention economy” to the “creator economy” (Forbes, 2020), which quickly became an oft-touted but seldom-defined Silicon Valley buzzword that implies an artistic renaissance but belies ever-increasing technological mediation. The “creator economy” phrase is used to describe the recent platformisation and subsequent monetization of individuals’ digitally-native “content” (Yuan, 2020). This “economy” was borne out of the intersection of two technological advances: first, the rise of progressively powerful and increasingly accessible creative tools, which enable professional-level creativity for anyone with access to an internet-connected device. Second, a plethora of platforms for consuming creative content have come online, including social media sites that extract value from advertisements surrounding the creative content (e.g. Instagram and TikTok).

There is a healthy and growing area of scholarship focused on the political economy of platformised cultural production, including Nieborg & Poell’s (2018) theorization of platforms as the site of mutual

contingencies between cultural producers and new forms of distribution. Other scholars (Duffy et al., 2021) have highlighted the extreme precarity of platformed labour, as algorithms are particularly capable of decreasing circulation of creators' work: by determining which audiences see which content, they can instantly render content invisible by failing to display it to an online audience. Therefore, platforms are empowered to confer or remove "visibility and hence status" for cultural creators (Poell et al., 2021). At the same time, other scholars have identified shifting notions of the "creative class," taking into account the globalization of both creative production and consumption (Lin & de Kloet, 2019; Wilson & Keil, 2008). This momentum in scholarship on globalizing perspectives of the creative class affords an opportunity to rethink normative notions of the creative class, creativity, and creative labour.

Indeed, algorithmic platforms maintain control over what creative content is surfaced to whom, becoming the gatekeepers (Metoyer-Duran, 1993) of creative content. Just as previous generations of creators sought the approval of art critics, museum curators, gallery owners, or art collectors, the current generation must add another stakeholder to the mix: the algorithm. Algorithmic curators are gatekeepers that mediate the creative's access to an audience. If the algorithm decides that a piece is worthy, the online audience will be exposed to it; if not, the piece is rendered invisible online. Therefore, creatives are driven to pursue projects that provide visibility on these platforms (Poell et al., 2021). Becker presciently warned that systems of distribution directly impact the creative work that will be distributed in that system (Becker, 2008). Of course, creators do not have to follow these conventions, but they will "pay the price in...decreased circulation of their work" if they do not begin to pander to the distribution systems' expectations (Becker, 2008).

The more cultural producers distribute and monetize content through platforms, the more platform curation steers which content becomes visible and, therefore, monetizable (Poell et al., 2021). As Ohlheiser describes, "small algorithmic changes by a platform can make or tank an entire career" (Ohlheiser, 2020). Researchers describe this as "a centralisation of curatorial power" (Poell et al, 2021; Prey 2020; Bonini & Gandini, 2019; Bucher, 2018). In this way, Western algorithmic platforms assume a position of economic power while driving creators—and creators from the Global Majority—into economic precarity: they might lose their audience and income whenever a platform alters its curatorial structures (Duffy et al., 2021). Furthermore, the majority of creators are not making a living wage from their work for these algorithmic platforms (Poell et al., 2021), which rely on creators to make content that will keep their users entertained and their business profitable.

In this article, we examine this change in labour models by investigating the impact of algorithmic platforms on humans' creative processes and aesthetic choices. By examining the negotiation between human agency and algorithmic structure, we aim to reveal the dialectic relationship between creative work and the platforms on which it is shared.

In particular, we focus on creative work being done beyond the West, because existing research on creative norms and algorithmic platforms is heavily Western-centric. In many domains of technology, Western technology companies are vying for increased market share by imposing their own norms, beliefs, expectations, and cultural realities onto a global audience (Arora, 2019). Scholars have equated this to "data colonialism," in which Western countries impose their structures to extract value from marginalized nations (Couldry & Meijas, 2019). Hagerty and Rubinov have shown that technologies will have markedly different social impacts depending on the socio-cultural setting that

they exist within (Hagerty & Rubinov, n.d.). Indeed, the users' perception and understanding of the technology will be influenced by the cultural framework that they bring to bear. For instance, researchers have shown that "fairness" and "privacy" take on different meanings in different contexts, thereby warranting different technical implementations in those contexts (Hagerty & Rubinov, n.d.). Concerns of Western companies' impositions and misconceptions should be heightened in the context of creativity, which sits at the core of cultural expression and self-actualisation. Without active consideration of on-the-ground cultural realities, local expressivity may be diminished or even erased.

In this research, we examine the digital creative culture of a community in the Global South (Dados & Connell, 2012), a geography that has been historically overlooked, underinvested, and marginalized. Furthermore, several countries in the Global South have been plagued by legacy stereotypes of "imitator nations," though recent research has highlighted the innovative, creative contributions of these countries (Arora, 2019b; S. Lindtner, 2014; S. M. Lindtner, 2020). We aim to break down existing stereotypes and decolonize creativity studies, just as previous research has sought to decolonize other academic fields e.g. privacy studies (Arora, 2019b) and innovation studies (S. Lindtner, 2014; 2020). In addition to decolonizing privacy, security, finance, and other fields, academics have clearly demonstrated the importance of decolonizing perspectives of art & creativity (Mehta & Henriksen, 2022; Morris & Leung, 2015). For example, it has been shown that conceptions of creativity produced by Western academics do not consider "spirituality and...non-human agency," which are core components of creative processes for non-Western cultures (Mehta & Henriksen, 2022). Here, we provide empirical grounding through a case study of conceptions of creativity in India. Further, we bring their call to decolonize creativity studies into the digital age by situating our research in the context of digital creativity. In this way, we reify previous researchers' theorization of academia's overtly neo-colonialist approach to creativity by grounding their claims in an empirical case study.

Glăveanu and Sierra have provided a recent definition of creativity, including considerations that build on various existing models in the field, such as the multi-C model of creativity (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009), the 4P framework to define creativity (Rhodes, 1961), the 5A approach to unpacking creativity (Glăveanu, 2013), the 7C description of creative acts (Lubart & Thornhill-Miller, 2019), and the most recent definition of creativity: the 8P model (Sternberg & Karami, 2021). Importantly, Glăveanu and Sierra highlight the ways in which existing theories of creativity are deeply intertwined with considerations of personhood, agency, society, economy, and environment—but that these theories do not account for non-Western realities (Glăveanu & Sierra, 2015). In particular, they note that existing conceptions of creativity do not contain considerations of colonialism and oppression, highlighting this as a necessary area of further creativity research. To address this, we consider the "complex social, culture, and geographical space" of India, a space where the implications of Western colonization are highly visible. In this paper, we introduce findings that provide new conceptions of creativity, accounting for the digital cultural realities of India's local context.

In India, billions of new Internet users are coming online each year in a quest to participate in the global digital community through creative expression: nearly 30 million more people came online via connected mobile device in India in 2020 (Kemp, 2021). We aim to investigate how the rise of mobile-enabled algorithmic platforms are leveraged by these communities to enable the regeneration of their cultural identity through creative work and as potential sources of livelihood. This study will inform how technology-based inclusion can be fostered among displaced populations by moving beyond the

utility-driven paradigm of algorithmic use to that which leverages community affect, cultural identity, and creative practice for meaningful labour.

Artisans in India are paid barely minimum wages (usually less than Tk 500 – ca. 4.30 GBP per hour) despite the back-breaking labour of their unique craftsmanship (Bhattacharjee, Arora, & Raman, 2021). COVID-19 pushed this sector to embrace digitisation and e-commerce platforms due to market lockdowns. According to the Women and E-Commerce Forum (WE), at the peak of the Indian festival season in 2020, Tk 50 crores (close to 4.4 million GBP or 5.3 million EUR) worth of Jamdani items were sold across India through Facebook and WhatsApp alone. WE started in 2018, and within two years, members and followers on Facebook have reached around a million customers thanks to algorithmic connectivity and curation (Bhattacharjee, Arora, & Raman, 2021).

Recent scholarship demonstrates that the traditional dichotomy of work and play fails to acknowledge the overlaps and shared motivations that drive people to engage with technologies that go beyond instrumental to creative use cases (Arora, 2019; Arora & Rangaswamy, 2013). AI-driven social networks blur the boundaries between the two even more, as users' preferences and creative passions stimulate their online activities and participation. Recent studies have revealed that the use of mobile technologies among resettled refugees has been associated with the rebuilding of creative self-expression and cultural identity (Arora, Alencar, & Jaramillo-Dent, 2022).

This paper attempts to fill the void on digital creativity in non-Western algorithmic cultures by addressing the research questions below. Findings in the Indian context that align with existing Western research will signal potential universalisms in the context of global algorithmic cultures. At the same time, we will elucidate creative needs and cultural considerations that are unique to non-Western populations.

To this end, our research questions are:

1. What constitutes creativity in the cross-cultural, digitally-networked context?
2. How do young content creators in India perceive and practice creativity online?
3. What are the similarities and differences in digital creativity across global contexts?

We set out to answer these questions through a mixed methods approach that produces “thick” (Geertz, 1973) qualitative data, situated within the multi-layered context of India.

3 Methodology

In order to capture the complexity of creative digital cultures beyond the West, we have taken a multi-pronged approach. Honing in on youth in urban and semi-urban regions of India as our site, we further subdivided this site into two participant groups: students and practitioners. In the context of the “creator economy,” Gen Z represents the largest faction of those both creating and viewing creations. Furthermore, previous data on India indicates that the plurality of the country's internet users are Gen Z (Kemp, 2021); they are the group that is rapidly coming online in the Indian context, leveraging the world's fastest 4G network (Meeker, 2019).

3.1 Ethics

This project was led by this paper's co-authors, Professor Payal Arora at Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR) and doctoral researcher Laura Herman at the Oxford Internet Institute. Our colleagues in India

were recruited via FemLab, a feminist future of work initiative led by Professor Arora. All data was collected under ethical approval from both Erasmus University Rotterdam and the University of Oxford. As ethnography has a fraught history of being extractive and, to some views, neo-colonialist, we were particularly careful to provide reciprocal value to our “informants,” who we choose to call participants. To this end, we took an “action research” (Avison et al., 1999) approach. The workshops that we led with our participants served to provide knowledge and skills in design for the youth in low-income settings who aspire to be designers or strive to use design tools to best express themselves when online. Furthermore, we created paid internship opportunities for our participants with FemLab, our research group at Erasmus University Rotterdam. This has helped participants build their CVs and experience while gaining mentorship from our design team at FemLab. Furthermore, we hope that our insights will lead to real-world impact in terms of targeted design interventions and decisions to create accessible tools for resource-constrained communities in the Global South. In order to facilitate these changes, we have presented these results to the world’s largest creativity technology company, which is invested in making tools that serve the next generation of creators in the Global South. We also plan to provide insights to the Ministry of Education in India regarding deploying design tools to enhance engagement in the classroom. We are in dialogue with government stakeholders in India and hope to contribute to empowering these youth with viable and meaningful work opportunities. In this way, our research becomes reciprocal rather than extractive, ultimately providing benefits to our participants rather than simply extracting uncompensated knowledge from vulnerable groups.

3.2 Research approaches

At each site, we leveraged a mixed-methods approach to glean both behavioural and attitudinal insights through observation, participant responses, and various action research approaches. Firstly, we conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews, which covered questions about each participant’s individual lifeworld, family & social structure, motivations & goals, career aspirations, technology access, etc., before delving into questions specifically pertaining to creativity and algorithmic cultures. Across the sites, we interviewed 82 participants. In the school sites, we also conducted workshops, in which participants were first invited to illustrate what creativity meant to them and then to “co-create” solutions for various creative technologies. The workshops also served as quasi-focus groups as participants responded to the researcher’s follow-up questions regarding their activity outputs. Before and after the interviews & workshops, we also engaged in participant observation. To this end, we sat in on various classes, meetings, and community gatherings to get a sense of creative norms, practices, values, behaviours, and expectations. Where possible, we collected content that the practitioners shared in algorithmic contexts for subsequent visual and textual analysis. It is worth noting that, according to the linguistic norms of each site, some of the sessions were held in English, some in Hindi, and some in other local vernacular languages.

3.3 Sites

We included both practitioner and educational sites, as these are the two locations that Gen Z most commonly exists within today. In “meeting them where they are,” we foregrounded the participants’ daily realities. Furthermore, these two sites afforded us access to participants that represent a range of socioeconomic realities.

The education site included learners in a variety of learning contexts. Within the Indian school system, we selected a “government school,” a “government-aided private school,” and an “unaided private

school,” representing a spectrum of socioeconomic backgrounds. In the context of these schools, we spoke to male and female students ranging from 14-18 years old.

The practitioner site included aspirational influencers, local artisans, social service communicators, and small business owners & entrepreneurs. The semi-structured interviews at this site covered the participants’ creative tools and processes, experience with algorithmic platforms, audience-building and branding, content aesthetics, and their lifeworld context. In the observational sessions, we observed their creative processes and engagement in algorithmic contexts.

4 Results

4.1 Conceptual framework

Drawing on desk research, we produced a conceptual framework for decolonizing creativity studies, which has been refined through our own ethnographic findings and analysis. It frames “Creativity as...” Access, Identity, Expression, and Data. This framework offers an approach for examining digital creativity across global socioeconomic contexts. Below, we share our results in alignment with this framework.

4.2 Creativity as...

4.2.1 Access

Access is arguably the most important aspect of our framework in the context of this study; our participants demonstrated how technological aspects mediates both their platform experience as well as their own creative expression. As we consider creativity as Access, it is important to highlight the impact of low-powered devices and minimal connectivity on creative decision-making. A plethora of data shows that people coming online in the Global South are typically using lower-powered devices: that is, inexpensive smartphones with minimal storage memory, or functionality. They may also be using significantly weaker internet connections, which may precipitate lengthy loading times or the inability to load certain pages at all. This is unlikely in India, however, due to a Reliance Jio partnership that has resulted in the country having the fastest and least expensive 4G connectivity in the world (Meeker, 2019).

We also found that many participants were sharing profiles and login details with other users. For instance, students in the government school said “I use my brother’s redmi note 9” and “I can have access to my mom or dad’s [grandmother’s] phone 24 x 7.” In the context of algorithmic platforms, this drastically changes an experience that is designed to be personalized for a single individual, flummoxing algorithmic systems that are designed to “learn” the traits of an individual based on their behavioural tropes. For instance, an algorithmic system may compare swipe speed or viewing time between sessions, taking these as indicators of enjoyment; if differences are due to a different user rather than a different sentiment, the platform misunderstands its users. The on-the-ground reality—including fewer, shared devices and an inability to pay for multiple accounts—has rendered device and account sharing necessary. Therefore, it is worth considering how digital access to shared accounts might be afforded by designing experiences that account for the possibility of multiple users on a single account.

There are other cultural realities that (de)limit creative access. For instance, limited leisure time necessitates certain creative processes. Creative content must be made quickly and all at once, to be shared gradually throughout the coming weeks. Participants also indicated that they have less time to leverage the functionality of multiple apps, due to the switching costs of moving across platforms. Nonetheless, it is worth highlighting that many of our participants were creating during their leisure time, even when the creations would benefit their work or side hustle. In this way, leisure time becomes commoditized as content creation is simultaneously viewed as both a personal endeavour and a monetizable opportunity.

Additionally, platforms may be inaccessible due to vernacular cultures. Many participants who speak local vernacular languages (India has 22 official languages, and nearly 20,000 other languages are in use throughout the country) find that platforms are not properly localized into the relevant language for them, rendering the functionality and content inaccessible.

4.2.2 Data

As users' access mediates their creativity as Data, we disavow the antiquated "imitator nations" trope. Plagiarism and replication are sometimes perceived as beneficial, as algorithmic cultures thrive on repeatability and shareability. This leads to an increase in "remixes," or content that is formed through taking another creator's content and altering it. However, many creators that we spoke with are anxious about their content being used without attribution, and they participate in social surveillance to minimize potential harms. For example, one young student at the government school asked, "What if someone posts my video? How do I prove I did not copy?" An older student, when speaking about remixing, clarified: "I will obviously credit them."

We also found that risk-taking behaviour (i.e. personal data sharing, poor cybersecurity, etc.) increases among low-income users, resulting in minimal data protection. This puts low-income creators at particular risk of algorithmic harm.

As hypothesized, we also found that participants make creative decisions based on engagement metrics, researching trends and aesthetics that will optimize their content. A young student in the government school recited engagement metrics like a mantra: "Like is good, comment is better, sharing is great, subscribing is best." An aspirational influencer described conducting data analysis to inform their creation and sharing processes:

"I have analysed all data...I have done experiments...I have concluded that this is the best time for posting on social media....If I posted in morning, I get up to 10,000 views only. Afterwards, it goes up to 40 to 50,000... Until evening or night...if it starts trending then it gets more views, but average views are 40 to 50,000."

In this way, they shape their creative practice according to data that indicates how the algorithmic platform is making decisions. They describe creative decisions that result in enhanced engagement—measured according to the platform's data-driven metrics—and they try to make those decisions as much as possible. For instance, most creators now perceive short-form videos as prioritised by algorithmic platforms, so they are keen to produce more of these videos. One creator also described creating a series of images that were designed to be viewed as "Stories" on Instagram, to foster engagement by encouraging people to "tap" through the images as they are viewing Stories: "We...break down a lot of the big stories into tap, tap, tap. So we used to use that kind of functionality,

that kind of like instinct of going tap, tap, tap to get people to read like an entire story from front to end.” In this way, participants are leveraging the user experience of the platform to foster engagement with their audience while also conforming to creative norms that are encouraged by the platform’s interface.

Device sharing, which is mentioned as a prevalent behaviour in section 3.2.1 above, is also gendered and impacts user privacy. The sharing of data is founded in gender-based and socioeconomic norms. As shown by Sambasivan et al., (2018) wealthy individuals—who, notably, have access to individual devices—are perceived as privacy-conscious. Those who are not wealthy, on the other hand, view themselves as unentitled to privacy, therefore they continuing to engage in data-sharing risk-taking behaviours, such as sharing devices.

4.2.3 Identity

In the context of Creativity as Identity, we found that participants were keen to identify as “self-taught” creators; this was reflected in their learning processes and tool usage patterns, which largely leveraged “learning by doing” approaches. One creator indicated that “training” was the wrong word for us to be using, suggesting “practice” instead; this demonstrates that learning is not provided by an instructor but rather is enabled by personal experimentation. Being “self-taught” was worn by creators as a badge of honour. For lower income groups, being self-taught was a necessity; however, even high-income groups sought to be self-taught, discounting opportunities for more formal training. For instance, a student at the private school proudly exclaimed, “I am a very self-learning person!”

Across all of our participants, creativity was seen as a vessel for self-expression. In this way, creative outputs become vehicles of one’s own identity. This identity formation is a primary purpose for creativity, in both social, personal, and business contexts. In the words of one student, “what is the point of making if I don’t share it?”

The Indian concept of jugaad is a useful metaphor that our participants employed when discussing their creative identity. For instance, when asked to describe examples of creativity, one student at the private school said, “my mom and my nani...the jugaads they make in the world.” Jugaad is a cultural concept that describes a non-conventional “hack” in which readymade elements are combined to serve a new purpose. One creator said that they describe their creative process to friends and followers as: “I use jugaad, not filters.” As part of their Indian identity, jugaad was core to our participants’ conception of remixes, which are a central facet of algorithmic culture. Jugaad-ian remixes combine one or more pieces of existing content to produce an original creation.

Aside from individual identities, collective identities also play a role in creative experiences. One participant described a yearning for creative community: “a lot of my ideal world involves a lot of community... just imagine all of us sitting together and talking about art and creating it.” This participant described creative roles, as currently conceptualized in Western roles, as extremely “lonely.” One way creatives find collective support is through online communities—which are vital in reinforcing collective creative identity amongst their members—that gather on social platforms. Such communities provide resource-constrained group members with access to expensive applications, learning resources, mentorship schemes, award-based competitions, and scholarships for creative tools. Subsequently, creativity comes to be the result of participation in a collective, and the collective’s influence is visible in the creative outputs.

4.2.4 Expression

In Creativity as Expression, we note that self-expression also contains aspects of cultural belonging. As they express themselves, creators seek to gain access to and/or participate in group exchanges. For instance, some participants sought offline “DIY clubs” with whom to create with, for, or in. Others use platform-based affordances, such as hashtags, to find belonging in online communities with similar interests.

As they enter communal groups, we observed our participants creating aspirational digital personas for their online selves. These self-expressions may not be representative of their offline self, but they are able to represent the self as they so choose. This is a unique provision in digital contexts, where people are not limited by their physical reality, whether that be location, class, gender identity, and so on. In this way, the way a person chooses to creatively express him or herself online is representative of their aspirations, which may or may not be realized in the offline realm.

Once again, remixing emerges as a fundamental tenet of expression. Participants remix others’ content to provide their own “spin on,” reaction to, or interpretation of others’ content. In this way, remixing facilitates a conversation in which creative outputs function as one’s opinion or contribution. At the same time, remixing allows creators to keep up with the rate of production that appears to be rewarded by algorithmic platforms, according to the Data that they track. In the words of one participant:

“Remixing content, mashing things up, and reviving old trends are very important because you do not always have something to say. The frequency at which digital media demands content creation is beyond my capacity as an individual creator. Remixing context, hopping onto trends, and using international content and remixing it with realities/ content from India allows me to stay relevant.”

Creative expression, in turn, is used to build social capital and mobility. As participants express their aspirational personas through online creative content, they seek to attract opportunities to escape the limitations of their reality. Algorithmic platforms provide a window to opportunities around the world, and our participants sought opportunities to participate in the global rhetoric of creative media.

As people attempt to express themselves, templates emerge as a core facet of the creative experience. Templates both enhance creative accessibility and minimize unique expressivity. Participants preferred to use templates rather than begin their creative process from a “blank page.” This is because templates do the foundational work of producing a certain type of file with a specific design. Participants also appreciated that they could customize templates, such that they are able to maintain a semblance of originality and control over their content. Furthermore, the ready-made nature of templates allows participants to save time that they would typically spend on executing technical functions. In a resource-constrained and time-based labour economy, this is particularly valuable. In the words of one participant, “In a world of quick consumption, you cannot expect me to create everything from scratch. The templates are great. They give you something basic to work with, and then you can jazz it up and make it look like your work.” As a result, participants felt that using templates allowed them to spend more time actually “being creative.”

Indeed, we observed an impact of socioeconomics on template usage. Lower to middle income groups are drawn to aesthetics that they associate with upward mobility, such as the clean & minimalist

“Instagram aesthetic.” It is worth pointing out that this is an association with a global, Western platform; on the other hand, they viewed the aesthetics of local Indian social media as “not nice,” citing images on ShareChat as examples of a “tough” and “unappealing” aesthetic. Here, we see our participants caught in the dichotomy of local, relevant aesthetics that may be less appealing and international, foreign aesthetics that tap into desires of global mobility. One participant aptly described being taught that “global” designs are “good,” while more “Indian” designs resonated with her:

“I found...the visuals of it...very Indian. And it was also very different from the kind of aesthetics that you have been taught at art school. Because...the world has been pushing towards this very minimal and clean kind of design, and that is what you're taught to look at as like good design.”

In this way, algorithmic cultures may be encouraging a unified, globalized design language, silencing local cultural norms. One example of local cultural norms was evident in our participants’ selection of templates, which was particularly occasion-driven. They choose templates for religious festivals, events, and rituals that match the event’s Desi characteristics. Indeed, both high-income groups and civic collectives sought templates with explicitly Desi aesthetics, demonstrating a focus on local cultures and communities. Similarly, we observed several creators that explicitly sought to create content that was inspired by South Asian aesthetics. Indeed, one creator described her (usually challenging) attempts to “get imagery that is as desi as possible...[while] not using stock images.” Indeed, “stock” assets in templates typically conform to Western norms of expression. Microentrepreneurs also mentioned their attempts to create content that was “authentically Indian,” such as imagery of mangoes in childhood summers.

Furthermore, our participants described creative workflows that centred the process of remixing content, drawing upon other creators’ work as both the inspiration and the foundation of new creative endeavours. Rather than viewing this as a form of replication, participants deemed remixing to be an expression of originality. Participants were proud to have made unique outputs that were appreciated by a wider audience, including the audience of the original creator.

5 Discussion

5.1 Key findings

The primary aspect of the framework that mediates both technological and creative experiences for people in the Global South is Access; in order to succeed in decolonizing creativity and algorithmic platforms, we must focus on both a) socio-technical affordances to historically underinvested communities and b) designing platforms according to the access patterns of those who have been colonized. For instance, many use “shared profiles” in a collectivist manner, but this usage pattern is not supported by existing models of platform access, which operate on an assumption of providing independent experiences for isolated individuals.

Another key takeaway from this research is that creative processes are being influenced by “algorithmic cultures,” Ted Striphas’ term for the “enfolding of human thought, conduct, organization and expression into the logic of big data and large-scale computation, a move that alters how culture has long been practiced, experienced and understood” (Striphas, 2015). We observed several ways in which Indian creators are altering their process to suit perceived algorithmic priorities. One recurring

example of this was the prevalence of remixing; another is the use of templates, which make creative outputs parsable to algorithmic models trained on reams of similar data.

Creative aesthetics are similarly being influenced by algorithmic cultures. Certain visual signatures are perceived to be preferable for algorithmic distribution. In previous research (Herman & Hwang, 2022), participants indicated that they would prioritise “attention grabbing” content for algorithmic contexts. This is neatly precipitated by the “attention economy” (Simon, 1996), which has trained content consumers to expect evermore salient content as corporations look to capitalize on algorithmic visibility. In the current study, participants similarly opted for aesthetics that they believed would optimize the visibility of their creative outputs. However, being influenced by the algorithm does not equate to a reduction of creativity. On the contrary, our participants view templates as tools to their creative and oftentimes political messages. By adopting templates, they focus more time on building their creativity within their content.

It is also important to note the mechanisms by which Indian digital creators’ self-perceptions are formed. Two primary inputs contribute to creators’ self-perception: first, their model of learning shapes their creative identity. For instance, many creators are proud to be “self-taught” creatives, taking an active “learning by doing” approach to creative education. In contrast, they view formal learning processes as “passive.” Having taught themselves creative practices, tool usage, and sharing practices, these creators take pride in their self-sufficiency, and they are keen to highlight their learning approach. A creator’s online identity also shapes their self-perception; indeed, this is a cyclical process: creators make content that supports a certain identity; then, this identity mediates the content that they create in the future. This is further complicated by creators’ online identities being particularly aspirational: though they represent the creator’s ideal self-identity, they may not be grounded in offline reality. For a generation of creatives that reach their audience primarily online (while this audience access is mediated by algorithms), their idealized online identity may be more relevant than their offline one. After all, online, they are citizens of a global network (Arora, 2019); offline, they are stifled by resource constraints and cultural norms, which are oftentimes gendered.

The creative technology itself is perceived as either global or vernacular, and creators’ usage of the technology varies accordingly. This applies to the digital tools that they use to create content as well as the platforms on which they share said content. As an example of the latter, Instagram is perceived as “global,” while ShareChat is perceived as “local.” Other local platforms include moj, Josh, Nojoto, and Chingari. While many creators aspire to reach audiences on global platforms, local platforms may be more accessible and sustainable. Depending on creators’ goals, local platforms may also be better suited to building a monetizable audience (if, for example, they are offering a regional service or shipping goods). Few global creation tools are properly localized into regional vernacular languages, precluding access for creators that have not been trained in global languages like English. Typically, only upper-class Indians have access to English language training. This creates a power imbalance in which wealthier creators have access to a wider array of creative tools and functionalities. Sometimes, they nonetheless choose to leverage local creation platforms: these platforms will be better suited for content that contains text from a vernacular language, or for content that leverages culturally relevant templates.

5.2 Considerations for creativity beyond the west

In examining findings that pertain specifically to non-Western audiences, it becomes apparent that self-teaching models are paramount. In this study, participants claimed to be self-taught across both formal and informal learning settings, as well as outside of learning contexts; being self-taught is considered a badge of honour.

Furthermore, creativity is particularly instrumental in non-Western contexts; each creation aims to serve a purpose, whether that purpose be monetization, communication, advertising, or community participation. One of the most important purposes for creativity is self-expression; participants in India are particularly keen to express their opinions, desires, and personalities. With online algorithmic platforms, their self-expression has the potential to reach a global audience. Coming from a region that has historically been colonized, silenced, and disregarded, Indian creators appreciate this opportunity to be heard.

As they look to a global audience, non-Western creators find foreign creative tools and aesthetics to be particularly aspirational. Since their creativity allows them to commune with a foreign audience, they are particularly eager to “fit in” with this audience by employing the relevant creation practices. As shown in previous work by one author, people in non-Western regions are more likely to identify as “global citizen” rather than as a constituent of their own country. They use imagery, aesthetics, and tools that help them evoke this status (Arora, 2019). However, the cultural realities that such users inhabit—such as their vernacular languages, local networks, etc.—make local processes and aesthetics more sustainable. This creates a unique tension between foreign aesthetics, processes wrought by algorithmic access, and local practices that align with offline realities.

Importantly, our findings make a case to disavow the harmful “imitator nations” stereotype once and for all. Citizens of non-Western countries, as Lindtner et al. (2020) note, are in fact on the cutting edge of innovation. This is aptly embodied by the creativity displayed throughout this research, which includes unique, original contributions to a global discourse. Local concepts like India’s *jugaad* frame the innovative ways in which these communities creatively recombine concepts to form cutting-edge creative outputs.

5.3 Universalisms of algorithmic cultures

Our research also aligns with previous research into online creativity in the West; these points of alignment reveal potential universalisms in the human experience of digital creation within increasingly algorithmic cultures. Across geographies, it is apparent that creators are attempting to “hack the algorithm.” That is, they change their creative form, content, and processes according to marketing strategies, personal platform experiences, and algorithmic lore (Bishop, 2020) that presupposes what is being prioritised by the platform (Bishop, 2022). Drawing on these sources of information, creators actively choose to change their work to pander to perceived algorithmic priorities in exchange for increased visibility. In this way, the algorithm is perceived as a gatekeeper of the possible audience for a piece of creative content. Given this centrality of the algorithm as a creative stakeholder, creators are designing content according to its implied suggestions. Jeremy Wade Morris describes this role of the algorithm as a “Bordieusian infomediary:” a curator-gatekeeper that exhibits control over what content is created, how it’s shared, the audience it reaches, and how it is perceived (Morris, 2015).

At the same time, creators may be subconsciously influenced by a subtler force: the platform's design, which shapes what artists produce. Applying Davis' theory of affordance impact (Davis, 2020), the platform's designed affordances encourage certain types of work; downstream, other affordances influence audience expectations. These expectations, mediated by the platform, are fed back to creators, inciting further changes to their creative process and output (Bishop, 2022).

One example, raised by participants in this research as well, is the perceived prioritization of "attention grabbing" content (Herman & Hwang, 2022). The algorithmic platforms that make up the "attention economy" (Simon, 1996) seem to push human audiences toward evermore salient content, including that with bright colours, high contrast, and multisensory outputs. Since audiences are being driven toward this content, creators who make this content are roundly rewarded. Therefore, creatives undergo pressure to make their own creative outputs more attention grabbing, as described by several participants in this study.

In facilitating the creation of audiences, algorithms have produced "niche" audiences that are served content pertaining to narrow topics or aesthetics. As creators across the globe seek larger audiences, one might expect them to lean into broadly applicable "pop" content. On the contrary, creators are focusing on niche content that speaks to the narrow audiences prescribed by algorithmic platforms. By finding one's "niche," a creator is much more likely to achieve algorithmic visibility, given that they are competing against fewer creators for a specific audience. Ultimately, this does provide them with large audiences, due to the inherently enormous nature of the platforms' populations: at a global level, niche audiences can swell to a large and loyal community.

In this research, it also became apparent that a creator's process is part of their perceived product (i.e., creative output) in algorithmic spaces. This follows from previous research of ours (Herman & Hwang, 2022) that revealed that a perceptible process increases the perceived creative value of content shared in algorithmic spaces. In the present research, creators pointed out that sharing their process was an additional tactic for audience engagement. Some creators take this a step further, actively including their audience in the creation process via co-production approaches. They see co-production as a way to build ongoing communication, enforce authenticity and trust, offer tailor-made services, reduce risk in their outputs, and build loyalty through collaborative creativity.

Finally, the prevalence of remixing processes is worth highlighting, as it appeared in the findings for three out of four concepts in our framework. Remixing is increasingly popular with global audiences because, as in this research, people around the world perceive algorithmic platforms as prioritising remixes for audience visibility. Algorithmic platform affordances also encourage the creation of remixes through their design, such as TikTok's creator tooling that suggests the creation of "Duets" or "Stitches." In this way, algorithmic platforms are shifting creative norms from the "blank slate" approach of original content to a networked stream of lightly edited pre-existing content. This, like many findings described above, has the potential to shift global cultural norms, thereby placing algorithmic platforms in positions of ever-increasing power over vulnerable creator populations, such as those in historically colonized regions.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, we have brought a non-Western, decolonial perspective to the ongoing discourse surrounding digital creativity and algorithmic cultures. It is imperative that we consider the local impacts and vernacular realities of algorithmic platforms, particularly as they form the basis of new labour models (i.e. the “creator economy”). Creators outside of the West may be particularly reliant on platforms to distribute their work. As we have written previously (Herman, 2023), when algorithmic platforms are not constructed with relevant audiences in mind, they risk removing opportunities from their most vulnerable users. As one example, Etsy takes a Western view of “handmade,” viewing handmade and mass-produced as dichotomous; the reality in India is that wares can be both handmade and mass-produced. By de-platforming mass-produced items under the assumption that they are not handmade, Etsy minimizes the possibility for Indian creators to reach a global audience (Shields, Arora, and Herman, 2021). With this article, we encourage other researchers in the field to examine their Western biases and consider conducting fieldwork with the Global Majority so as to avoid reinforcing Western perspectives that do not accurately reflect the global digital experience. In so doing, we offer a conceptual framework for researchers to utilize in future research: Creativity As... Access, Identity, Expression, and Data. By leveraging this model to organize their results, researchers will be sure to cover the multitudinous ways that technology is impacting creative practices.

In this study, for instance, we have highlighted several unique contextual realities of digital creativity in India. For instance, our findings support the idea that self-expression is a core value for digital creativity in India, and the mechanisms of expression are self-taught. Furthermore, this expression is viewed as instrumental, accomplishing a goal of monetization, marketing, or communication. We also demonstrate that, while foreign aesthetics may be aspirational, it is vernacular aesthetics that are directly impactful. Therefore, our participants experience a tension between mimicking global aesthetic tropes disseminated via algorithmic platforms and, alternately, pioneering digital aesthetics that fit their local cultural norms. Our findings support the replacement of the dangerous “imitator nations” trope with a perspective of these geographies as innovator nations instead. Indeed, India’s concept of *jugaad* vivifies this level of innovation.

At the same time, we have also highlighted aspects of digital creativity that mirror findings reported across the West, such as the production of content that the algorithm is perceived to prioritise in order to reach a broader audience. One example is the prevalence of remixing for perceived algorithmic visibility. Similarly, creators across the globe tend towards the creation of attention-grabbing content as the “attention economy” is wont to prioritise. We also demonstrate how creative process information has become increasingly valuable, and how creators struggle with the dichotomy of niche versus scalable content as algorithmic platforms provision niche audiences that may swell to a loyal community. Creators want their content to reach a large audience, but this is counterintuitively more likely to happen if they create content that applies to a specific niche, which will be accessible and amplified through algorithmic processes. In these ways, we have leveraged our proposed framework to reveal key universalisms regarding the impact of algorithmic cultures on digital creativity.

6.1 Limitations & next steps

Of course, many open questions remain. In particular, more research is required to generalize these results to other historically colonized regions, which form a multi-sited and multi-layered context. It is also likely that some of these results will not generalize; in these cases, it is particularly important to

research and share the unique cultural realities that may impact algorithmic cultures in various geographies. It will also be useful to consider vectors other than geography that may be useful in representing the Global Majority, such as race, socioeconomic status, religious identity, sexuality, gender identity, and other intersectional identities. Looking ahead, we plan to conduct further research with creators from the Global Majority, taking a practice-based approach to co-create a platform that prioritises and heeds their needs as opposed to those of Western profit-driven technology companies. This research will reveal the key considerations of the most vulnerable creators, highlighting possibilities for new models of creativity distribution that foreground global priorities.

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