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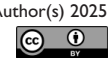

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Peripheral creator labor: Navigating regional marginalization and resistance in social media entertainment

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Abstract

This article examines how social media creators in the United Kingdom navigate regional labor dynamics in small urban cities and towns and their perceptions of potential resistance strategies. Grounded in a creator workers' inquiry and thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with creators ($N = 53$), it expands the notion of peripheral creator labor. It reveals how digital factors and historically entrenched regional disparities exacerbate the global platform precarity experienced by different types of peripheral creators and the relative privilege of peripheral English-language Western-based creators. The study introduces the concepts of *regional monetization precarity* and *localized production space and networking precarity* to capture the unique challenges creators face in small urban cities and their shared strategic resistance strategies to effect change, combining professional support and unionization. This study contributes to theoretical understandings of creator labor by challenging a binary notion of "center-periphery" relations and a homogeneous Western user experience in creator economies.

Keywords

Creators, influencers, labor, platforms, political economy, social media, work

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Video-based social media entertainment (SME) platforms have been integral to the global rise of the creator economy (Cunningham and Craig, 2019). This economy comprised an estimated 303 million self-employed creators worldwide in 2022, including 16.6 million creators in the United Kingdom, representing an increase of 8 million creators since 2020 (Adobe, 2022; ConvertKit 2022). YouTube alone contributed over £1.4 billion to the country's gross domestic product in 2021, sustaining 40,000 full-time equivalent jobs (Oxford Economics, 2022). British creators like KSI, Zoella, and Joe Sugg have amassed large social media followings, earning millions and enjoying autonomy in SME careers (Cunningham and Craig, 2019; Poell et al., 2022). However, SME work aligns with platform capitalism, precarity, and neoliberal values, including individualized risk, competition, self-entrepreneurship, meritocracy, consumerism, and data extractivism (Bollmer and Guinness, 2024; Bonini and Treré, 2024; Steinberg et al., 2024). These values arguably normalize low pay, job insecurity, stressful working conditions, burnout, the need for public visibility, metrification of performativity, and social inequalities. Creators often occupy privileged social positions, reinforcing digital divides and class-based careers (Brake, 2014). Despite lower barriers to accessing the "creator middle class" (Florida, 2022: 4), creators face challenges in establishing sustainable and decently-paid full-time careers. YouTube particularly is dominated by a small elite group in terms of subscribers and views (Rieder et al., 2023). The United Kingdom Digital Culture Media and Sport Committee (DCMS) (2022) *Influencer Culture* report attributes these issues to minimal governance and professional support from platforms, collective trade associations, or unions. However, further research is needed on how creators navigate regional labor dynamics within peripheral urban cities and towns in the West to better understand how workers could negotiate their relationship with platform companies and brands (Bonini and Treré, 2024; Soriano and Cabalquinto, 2022; Steinberg et al., 2024; Steinberg and Li, 2017).

Framed by this context, this article adopts a workers' inquiry approach, collaborative qualitative analysis (CQA), and thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with creators in and/or originating from small urban cities and towns in Yorkshire and The Humber, United Kingdom ($N = 53$). It aims to understand how these peripheral creators navigate their regional labor dynamics. Yorkshire, one of England's nine regions according to geographic structure (Office for National Statistics (ONS), n.d.), is home to several small urban cities/towns compared to London, including Leeds, Sheffield, and Bradford. Since the 1970s, Yorkshire has faced economic decline and regional disparities exacerbated by neoliberal policies, intensifying a north-south divide in England, with wealth concentrated in London, and inequalities in access to financial capital, job quality, and social deprivation (Jewell, 1994; Taylor, 2001). This peripheral status is reflected in England's legacy media production, which has long been criticized for "metropolitan centricity" (Harvey and Robins, 1994: 41). This context is important for understanding how specific regional dynamics shape peripheral SME creators' common and distinct labor dynamics in small urban cities/towns.

This article challenges a binary notion of center-periphery relations and a homogeneous Western user experience in creator economies. The next section critically reviews literature within political economy and creator studies to build a conceptual framework to examine peripheral creator labor dynamics, considering tensions among regional

marginalization, privilege, and resistance. The article then conducts a thematic analysis of interviews with creators guided by the following research question: *How do peripheral English-language creators in small urban cities and towns navigate regional labor dynamics involved with monetizing their content and managing their production practices within the context of both marginalization and privilege?* The discussion and conclusion extends the concept of peripheral creator labor by analyzing its manifestation in small urban Western cities/towns, foregrounding how regional labor dynamics vary significantly even within privileged countries. By focusing on relative privilege, this article helps researchers understand that peripheral creator labor exists on a spectrum shaped by distinct regional and socioeconomic factors. This study indicates that research on peripheral labor in Western creative economies must account for intra-national variations in access to resources that shape platform precarity and creators' resistance strategies.

Literature review

This section considers precarious creator labor and resistance practices, highlighting the marginalization of regional creators within global media markets in terms of monetization and production practices. It explicates the term *peripheral creator labor*, which describes creators within particular countries that are marginal at the national and subnational levels. While the terms *national* and *subnational* refer to creators' specific geographical contexts, *peripheral* highlights their relative position within the global hierarchy of material and platform labor. Peripheral signifies "how localized labor conditions create new factors in precarity" and "innovative survival strategies" (Bidav and Mehta, 2024: 2). This article considers a distinct subset of peripheral creators who have unique advantages, expanding the notion of peripheral creator labor to include small urban Western cities and towns. It acknowledges the global dominance of English, granting creators in colonial nations relative privilege to build a following domestically and internationally (Bidav and Mehta, 2024; Cunningham and Craig, 2019). However, peripheral creators often operate within a global digital hierarchy that limits their opportunities compared to those in dominant markets. This usage of peripheral does not imply that creators universally perceive their position as marginal. Instead, this article recognizes that this terminology is context-dependent, reflecting a dichotomy prevalent in Western academic discourse. It aims to "displace or disrupt" and nuance homogeneous assumptions of binary relationships, like East versus West and North versus South (Lin, 2023: 13).

At the *national level*, peripheral creators are located in non-English-language Global South and settler-colonial nations (e.g. China, India, Morocco, the Philippines, and Turkey), where creators struggle to gain visibility and build followings due to language differences (Bidav and Mehta, 2024; El Marzouki, 2021; Kumar et al., 2021; Lin, 2023; Mehta and Kaye, 2021; Mohan and Punathambekar, 2019; Shtern et al., 2019; Soriano and Cabalquinto, 2022; Zhao, 2024). Some creators lack access to professional translation and dubbing services, limiting their ability to compete internationally. Peripheral creators in some East Asian, South Asian, and African countries face additional challenges, including regional audience and brand deal instability, alongside linguistic barriers. For instance, creators in South Africa, South Korea, and China balance Western

luxury brand messages within their postcolonial contexts (Dunn and Falkof, 2021; Iqani, 2019; Lee and Abidin, 2024; Zhao, 2016, 2021). Creators diversify income through various strategies, particularly crowdfunding and localized sponsored advertising, using specialized platforms within their home country, like Russia's DonationAlerts and Brazil's APOIA.se (Cunningham and Craig, 2019, 2021; Florida, 2022; Rieder et al., 2023). In the Philippines, Chile, and South Africa, creators generate localized sponsored advertising revenue from region-specific national and supranational brands, which lack the reach and resources of English-language Western brands (Arriagada and Siles, 2024; Iqani, 2019; Shtern et al., 2019; Soriano and Cabalquinto, 2022). These strategies also often exploit creators' labor, perpetuating pay disparities and platform biases, contributing to monetization challenges (Bonini and Treré, 2024; Cunningham and Craig, 2019; Poell et al., 2022; Rieder et al., 2023; Steinberg et al., 2024).

Platforms within some of these countries provide offline support. For example, China's Youku Tudou runs training in cinematography and digital marketing (Zhao, 2016). Some platforms also offer training and support to professionalize industry practices, such as country-localized versions of YouTube Go, including in India, Nigeria, and Brazil (Kumar et al., 2021; Mohan and Punathambekar, 2019), YouTube's creator support teams in the Philippines (Soriano and Cabalquinto, 2022), and an online Creator Academy. Creators, especially in lifestyle, beauty, vlogging, and gameplay genres, prefer low-production values content creation in personal environments to cultivate authenticity among their followers (Abidin, 2015; Cunningham and Craig, 2019; Soriano and Cabalquinto, 2022). Creators in genres like parenting, fashion, and food are more flexible to producing content outside these environments and could benefit from such professionalization initiatives. YouTube "Spaces" in cities like Dubai offered workshops and access to industry-standard equipment (Cunningham and Craig, 2019; El Marzouki, 2021; Healy, 2022). However, only creators boasting 10,000 or more subscribers and "high degrees of social capital" typically gained access (Bishop, 2018: 280). In 2016, YouTube introduced a hybrid model of virtual and temporary regional programming (Salamon, 2023).[1] Nevertheless, the ephemeral nature of these initiatives, subscriber thresholds, and geographic concentration of resources mainly in big global cities remain barriers for aspiring creators.

Peripheral creators examined at the *national level* are also based in small Western countries producing English-language content (e.g. Ireland and Australia) (Bidav and Mehta, 2024; Cunningham and Craig, 2019). They occupy a peripheral status in SME because they are located in smaller creator communities, lacking support initiatives to build vibrant creator economies. Despite producing content in English, they face challenges in navigating algorithmic uncertainties and establishing cultural relevance, so they must tailor their strategies to resonate both locally and internationally. Skip Ahead, a Screen Australia-YouTube partnership, enables YouTubers to collaborate with established television producers (Healy, 2022). Like other initiatives, Skip Ahead is accessible to only a small number of creators.

While most literature has addressed peripheral creators at the national level, some researchers have focused on peripheral creators in *subnational rural areas* (e.g. *sannong* creators in China's farming communities in the impoverished Huaiyang region) and *second* or *third-tier cities*, notably in China (Duan et al., 2023; Li, 2020; Lin, 2023; Zhao,

2024). These creators are peripheral in SME partially due to a cultural divide and uneven economic development between the urban and the rural and first-tier and lower-tier cities. They commodify agricultural, rural tourism, and local specialty products alongside their authentic rural identity. Given the urban-rural divide, they are still willing to accept low pay in order to work from their countryside homes rather than cities, reinforcing stratification in rural China. However, more research is needed that explores localized monetization and professional support for subnational peripheral creators, particularly in urban Western locales, and their resistance practices.

Peripheral creators engage in resistance practices to manage such platform precarity. Resistance involves actions by individual(s) in subaltern positions to challenge power dynamics or gain small, temporary advantages, like saving time or money (Bonini and Treré, 2024; Salamon and Saunders, 2024). Leveraging their algorithmic agency, users aim to intentionally influence power over algorithmic outputs through their everyday experiences with platforms, attributing new meanings and uses for algorithms to reduce platforms' asymmetrical power relations. Bonini and Treré (2024: 30) distinguish between platform users' "strategic algorithmic agency" and "tactical algorithmic agency aligned or not with the platform moral economy" (i.e. opposing neoliberal platform values). The concept of "moral economy" articulates how platform users' algorithmic agency is shaped by "moral values, rights, and customs" that sometimes compete or clash with those of platform companies; the platform moral economy refers to "a precise set of values that shapes the kinds of actions that users are allowed to take" and that are inscribed in platforms' organizational practices (Bonini and Treré, 2024: 33, 35). Reflecting the complex and heterogeneous nature of social media platforms, the notion of platform moral *economies* is characterized by contested values and internal fractures that underscore platforms' competing logics as distinct organizational entities (Bonini and Treré, 2024; Christin et al., 2024; Hallinan et al., 2022). While users can accept or negotiate platform moral economies just to survive, their personal and oppositional moral economies highlight social and collectivist values to change the system, including mutual support, user cooperation, and entrepreneurial solidarity. Users exercise their algorithmic agency either through *strategies* or *tactics* (high or low availability of expertise, money, and long-term plans, respectively).

Tactical resistance aligned with platform moral economies includes navigating professional status issues through self-guided online learning. For example, creators in the Philippines use YouTube as an academy to build their skills (Soriano and Cabalquinto, 2022). Some Filipino creators also code-switch between English and Tagalog to attract international and domestic audiences (Shtern et al., 2019). Furthermore, Moroccan Arab and Chinese creators build counterpublics through hashtag campaigns and humorous practices (El Marzouki, 2021; Zhao, 2016). Rural creators in China also replace words in their videos with related terms to avoid censorship (Zhao, 2024).

Other creators adopt *strategic resistance aligned with platform moral economies*. For instance, some creators in China embed product placements in their videos to boost their income (Lin, 2021). In addition, experienced Filipino creators monetize their entrepreneurial narratives and skills in Facebook communities (Soriano and Cabalquinto, 2022). Furthermore, young female Moroccan creators create alternative content and gender-segregated, female-inclusive spaces (El Marzouki, 2021).

Peripheral creators further engage in *tactical resistance not aligned with platform moral economies*. For example, creators based in various countries, including Singapore, build collective engagement pods for Instagram and TikTok through different platforms, mutually liking, sharing, or commenting on each other's content to increase their visibility (Abidin, 2018; Bonini and Treré, 2024). Furthermore, Chilean creators share information and gather tips in private international WhatsApp groups (Arriagada and Siles, 2024). Conversely, Chinese wanghong creators sometimes stay offline to avoid online attacks (Zhao, 2021). However, these strategic and tactical actions may perpetuate commodified and exploitative platform capitalisms, raising questions about how creators *challenge* platform moral economies in the long term (Bonini and Treré, 2024). In addition, many of the resistance tactics and strategies discussed above are adapted by successful Western creators in urban centers (Cunningham and Craig, 2019; Salamon and Saunders, 2024). However, the context of peripheral creators' disadvantaged positioning makes such resistance more crucial to their survival and growth. More research is still needed to uncover if peripheral creators in small urban cities/towns develop other *localized* resistance strategies (Bidav and Mehta, 2024).

While Western creators also adopt *strategic resistance not aligned with platform moral economies*, particularly unionization, further research could examine how cultural and regional variations may influence peripheral creators' experiences and perceptions of unionization. For example, Western creators form collective organizations, advocating for creators' rights and industry-wide standards to bolster creators' careers (Bollmer and Guinness, 2024; Bonini and Treré, 2024; Cunningham and Craig, 2019; Jarrett, 2022; Shiffman, 2022). In addition, some existing media unions, like the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, have extended union coverage to certain creators. Extant scholarship has considered fair creator union eligibility criteria, membership fees, accessibility, and potential benefits (e.g. pension, health insurance, and dispute arbitration). However, creators struggle to organize effectively due to the fragmented, competitive, and dispersed nature of their work, and preference for flexible work arrangements (Barbetta, 2022; Bollmer and Guinness, 2024; Bonini and Treré, 2024; Poell et al., 2022; Salamon, 2020; Salamon and Saunders, 2024; Shiffman, 2022). In addition, some creators are unaware of collective associations. Other associations have failed to win meaningful gains (Bonini and Treré, 2024; Cunningham and Craig, 2021). A lack of legal recognition and organization size further impede creators' strategic resistance actions (Jarrett, 2022).

This literature highlights small-scale acts of resistance within creators' everyday lives in two senses: using algorithms or platforms as tools *for* resistance and resisting the algorithms or platforms *themselves* (Bidav and Mehta, 2024; Bonini and Treré, 2024). However, this research downplays the significance of *imagining* systemic reforms or collective movement building, particularly those relevant to peripheral urban Western regions. This article contributes a Marxian workers' inquiry approach, foregrounding creators' insights into their struggles within platform capitalisms and their peripheral relations of production in small cities/towns (Englert et al., 2020; Marx, 1938 [1880]; Salamon, 2020; Salamon and Saunders, 2024). While previous literature has focused primarily on existing resistance practices, this article examines how peripheral creators' speculative ideas around strategies, including unionization,

could shape collective labor actions. By foregrounding workers' perspectives on *potential* resistance strategies, this article builds a foundation for imagining and articulating *new* forms of labor solidarity and structural reform that, though yet unrealized, have transformative potential. Such imagined strategies could reveal the desires and visions for change that may underpin future labor organizing.

Method

Framed by this literature, this study is grounded in semi-structured in-depth interviews with creators in or from small urban Yorkshire cities or towns ($N = 53$). To identify and recruit participants, the author and research assistant conducted online mapping research based on keyword and hashtag searches for creators through video-based social media platforms (Highfield and Leaver, 2015). We collected data on creators who produce content on at least two platforms: Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, Twitch, Pinterest, Snapchat, and/or OnlyFans. Various criteria were considered from each creator's accounts: keywords and hashtags related to local authority districts pertaining to cities within Yorkshire (e.g. #LeedsVlogger and #SheffieldBlogger); self-presentation of Yorkshire-relevant identities and biographies; content types; creator types; dates accounts created; and engagement metrics. The research team identified a sample of creators ($N = 326$). As exploratory research, this sample was not intended to be representative of all creators in the region (Babbie, 2021).

We then recruited interviewees by finding email addresses published on creators' social media accounts or direct messaging them. Interviews were conducted online through Google Meet and Microsoft Teams between June and September 2022, audio-recorded, and professionally transcribed. They ranged from 27 to 116 minutes, averaging 69 minutes and totaling 1185 transcribed pages. Interviewees were compensated with a £70 gift card for participating. This research received institutional research ethics approval and interviewees gave their written informed consent. Interviewees were offered the option to remain anonymous to ensure they felt comfortable speaking candidly. They were assigned interviewee numbers (e.g. C2, C15, C26). Other interviewees preferred to be identified by their given or creator names. Interviewees produce original short-form videos, long-form videos, and/or photos, using at least two platforms, mainly YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, Facebook, Twitch, and/or Pinterest. Their self-defined content types most commonly produced include lifestyle, gaming, travel, beauty, fashion, food, student vlogs and education, family and parenting, disability, health and wellness, Yorkshire life, fitness, music, book reviews, and/or comedy. Interviewees are nano-influencers (1,000–10,000 followers; $n = 28$), micro-influencers (10,000–50,000 followers; $n = 13$), mid-tier influencers (50,000–500,000 followers; $n = 9$), or mega-influencers (over 1 million followers; $n = 1$) on at least one account (Geyser, 2023; HypeAuditor, 2023).

The interviews are grounded in a *creator workers' inquiry*. This study modifies Marx's (1938 [1880]) workers' inquiry to understand creators' work experiences, demographics, workplace characteristics, employment arrangements, working hours, labor process, earnings, uses of digital technology, and potential ways to resist their labor dynamics (also see Englert et al., 2020; Salamon, 2020; Salamon and Saunders, 2024). Interviewees

were asked open-ended questions designed to be flexible, without imposing any preconceived notions, encouraging creators to share their unique perspectives on how they understand and navigate their regional context: personal backgrounds (e.g. cities/towns where they have resided); the labor process of cross-platform content creation (e.g. equipment they use, locations and physical spaces where they create content, and distinctiveness or not of creating content in and/or about Yorkshire cities); diversity, regional Yorkshire brand identity, and creator inclusion programs, including how being from and/or living in Yorkshire cities/towns influence their content creation or not; and working conditions and rights, including pay, access to training, career development, and collective representation in the region. While creators' work exists in a multisided market, it is beyond the scope of this article to grapple with competing interests because of my focus on peripheral creators' unique accounts of *how they navigate their regional labor dynamics and imagine resistance strategies*.

This study adopts CQA thematic analysis to examine these interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Richards and Hemphill, 2018). The research team aimed for rigor, transparency, and trustworthiness. We established procedures to promote consistency and consensus during the coding phase without relying on quantifying intercoder reliability. The research team initially met to create a data analysis plan, ensuring shared understanding and collaboration among team members. We discussed the project's guiding concepts and research questions generated from the literature review and the individual interviews that team members conducted, aiming to examine possible peripheral creator labor issues and solutions. Each team member independently reviewed the entire dataset and created memos in a shared Google Doc about potential first-order codes. Next, team members compared and discussed their memos, revised the research question, and developed a codebook through open and axial coding, which resulted in 3 master codes and 18 subcodes. As part of a larger project, this article foregrounds the geographical region-specific "Yorkshire" master code and related "Yorkshire deficit/disadvantages" subcode. The article recognizes labor dynamics as regional based on how interviewees frame their experiences in relation to this geographic location: when they explicitly mention regional challenges, advantages, or no impact in Yorkshire cities/towns, and implicitly refer to their local, cultural, political, economic, and/or technological conditions. Subsequently, team members independently applied the codebook to two transcripts and compared coding, ensuring common understanding and identifying common patterns. We uncovered regional markers that were not always obvious but became apparent through recurring points raised by multiple interviewees. Team members then independently coded a batch of different transcripts and met several times to discuss them. Finally, the author identified three generative themes and added annotations in NVivo to highlight key data excerpts and thick descriptions of these themes.

Findings

Regional monetization precarity

First, peripheral English creators struggle to secure city/town-specific brand partnerships and sponsorships, highlighting missed opportunities with local brands, unlike peripheral

creators elsewhere (El Marzouki, 2021; Iqani, 2019; Soriano and Cabalquinto, 2022). They have experience collaborating with Yorkshire city/town brands related to tourism, government, or universities. However, creators report that most brand deals originate from international or national companies based in London, reinforcing traditional material and digital divides (Brake, 2014; Taylor, 2001). They think that being located in the United Kingdom, rather than Yorkshire specifically, increases their likelihood of securing brand deals. Nevertheless, creators, such as Leeds-based Marissa and Gabrielle, recognize the "missed opportunities because we're from Yorkshire." Several brands have invited them to London for unpaid photo shoots or content creation, offering valuable opportunities to collaborate with other creators. However, peripheral creators find these gigs impractical due to the significant time commitment and lack of compensation. They elucidate a small urban Western city dimension, compared to the platform precarity that other peripheral creators experience in rural areas (Duan et al., 2023; Li, 2020; Lin, 2023; Zhao, 2024).

Peripheral creators also highlight the untapped potential of working with Yorkshire-specific city/town brands and producing regionally specific content. According to York-based Pippa, "There's a lot of missed opportunities in [. . .] Yorkshire, because there's so many cool things and so many places and so many great tourism boards [. . . .] Why are they not working with influencers to communicate this wider?" Similarly, Selby/York-based Jordan mentions potentially collaborating with Yorkshire football clubs and their fans when livestreaming the popular video game franchise *FIFA*: "[It] would be a big attachment for this area [. . .] if you did something football related with Leeds United [. . . .] I think you might get a lot of viewers in because they're quite passionate about their fans, their club and their football." Likewise, Huddersfield-based C2 recognizes "a market that's definitely missed a lot of opportunities" to build audiences in Yorkshire towns: "We watch a lot of American content creators and a lot of American content and we become sort of hybrids of that. And we kind of lose a little bit of pride for our areas and our local sort of surroundings." These creators perceive and strategically navigate the values within the platforms they use, which suggests resistance to the ways platform economies reward creators in small urban Western cities/towns. However, these findings suggest that their proposed strategic resistance may align with what researchers characterize as neoliberal (Bonini and Treré, 2024) and profit-driven (Hallinan et al., 2022) platform moral economies because creators do not challenge those underlying platform values.

Considering these monetization challenges, many interviewees diversify their revenue streams through subscription and merchandising platforms, highlighting national rather than local opportunities. Hull-based BobDuckAndWeave prefers Ko-fi, a United Kingdom-based platform self-described as a "Patreon Alternative" (Ko-fi Labs, 2023) with lower fees: "[Ko-fi] are actually very, very kind. They're a UK-based company and they're always supporting UK creators." Favorable payout rates are a factor in choosing these platforms. Nevertheless, BobDuckAndWeave's preference for Ko-fi also reflects an appreciation for the platform's United Kingdom origins and its support for local creators, indicating that national context and perceived community values contribute to his choice. Similarly, Bradford-born C26 has "gain[ed] a following on Instagram" to "direct traffic" to her e-commerce fashion shop on Depop, another United

Kingdom-based platform, to "generate sales." These peripheral creators reveal a nuanced approach to navigating the values embedded within global platforms (Bonini and Treré, 2024; Hallinan et al., 2022). While some creators recognize certain platforms' global dominance (Rieder et al., 2023), they also emphasize the significance of other specialized crowdfunding and merchandising sites like Ko-fi and Depop, which align with both their financial goals and cultural context.

Localized production space and networking precarity

Second, peripheral creators find it challenging to access professional production facilities, training, and networking opportunities in Yorkshire cities/towns, compared to global creator cities like London (Florida, 2022). Food creators, particularly those who cook, note the high energy costs associated with creating content from home and lack of public kitchen workspaces. Other Yorkshire creators across content types and number of followers recognize the value of producing personal, authentic, intimate, and low-budget content from their home workspaces (Abidin, 2015). However, they still believe that there are more valuable events, spaces, and collaborations with brands and other creators in London or elsewhere. Several peripheral creators, including York-based Dylan and Leeds-based Rachel O, praised London's YouTube Space for its workspace and equipment facilities, exemplifying "one downside of Yorkshire over London," says Rachel O: "I'm finding things like coworking spaces in general is more difficult [in Yorkshire]." Likewise, Leeds-based C15 recalls attending events in London, among them VidCon, with "backstage creators that have Instagram rooms or TikTok rooms where you can go and speak to people who work there, and they can give you advice." However, these "little popup" spaces, as C15 puts it, run by platform companies, are typically closed to the public. Other creators have attended blogger events, notably in York, but these events are the exception in Yorkshire. Sheffield-based C24 bemoans, "If I want to do any meet and greet or anything, I have to literally leave Yorkshire. There's nothing, honestly, except what I create for myself [. . .] or the ones that brands from other cities like London, Manchester, Birmingham, etc. create." These peripheral creators underscore the struggle to access London spaces, which requires high levels of social capital and mobility (Bishop, 2018).

Many creators feel that they are missing out compared to London creators. Leeds-based C18 says, "[B]ecause we're in Yorkshire, I get invited to London events all the time, but it's not feasible. I think we miss out quite a lot being up here." Although industry lore suggests that creators prefer home-based production spaces, it also highlights that some creators benefit from professional equipment and networking spaces, like YouTube Spaces (Abidin, 2015; Cunningham and Craig, 2019; El Marzouki, 2021). My findings confirm that these benefits are evident among certain creators' genres.

Peripheral creators face barriers because of the distance and cost of traveling to such events outside Yorkshire cities/towns. C15 attributes this issue to a perceived "disparity" between "London-based Southern creatives" and Northern-based creatives: "I feel like [creator culture is] much more of a norm [in London] than maybe it is in the North." Sherburn-based C10 reinforces this divide between Yorkshire's predominantly small towns and the country's metropolises, mainly in Southern England: "to become at the top

of the list nationwide, if you're from Yorkshire, I think it's difficult [. . . .] It's not as flashy as London and it's not [a] big metropolitan [region] like Manchester or Edinburgh." These challenges arguably perpetuate digital exclusion in small urban Western cities/towns, like they do in rural areas (Duan et al., 2023; Li, 2020; Lin, 2023; Zhao, 2024), and barriers to accessing the creator middle class (Brake, 2014; Florida, 2022).

Peripheral small urban city/town creators also imagine potential regional resistance strategies, emphasizing the importance of community building and peer learning (Soriano and Cabalquinto, 2022). They suggest expanding programs like the #YouTubeBlack Voices Fund in small cities/towns. This nationally run program in various countries grants Black creators access to a YouTube Partner Manager, seed funding, development sessions, and networking opportunities (YouTube, 2023). Bradford-based Gabriella notes that #YouTubeBlack is "inclusive just because it gives people opportunities to get to know the people that work at these platforms, have their say and learn, as well as [. . .] improve their content. So, they have better chances of going viral." If platforms extended such programs to other groups who might benefit from targeted and more specific avenues of support through "creative funds," Dylan affirms that aspiring regional creators and nano-influencers could afford professional-quality production equipment. Such programs could serve as a model for developing small city-based and platform-led "Creator Schools" (Florida, 2022: 27). In envisioning regional Creator Schools, peripheral creators express a desire to enhance the sustainability and support in small urban cities, which could provide long-term benefits beyond the scope of exclusive or temporary initiatives (Bishop, 2018; Cunningham and Craig, 2019; Salamon, 2023; Salamon and Saunders, 2024; Soriano and Cabalquinto, 2022; Weiss, 2019). Rather than directly challenging platform moral economies (Bonini and Treré, 2024; Hallinan et al., 2022), these proposals highlight how peripheral creators perceive the gaps in current platform support systems and platforms' potential role in addressing their needs.

In addition, creators envision bottom-up collective small-city urban creator spaces (Cunningham and Craig, 2021). To address perceived gaps in production and networking spaces, Leeds-based Hannah E imagines a public "Creator Hub" could be developed in one of Yorkshire's most-populated cities, like Leeds. This subscription-based Creator Hub could be accessible, with a low-cost fee of about £10 monthly. A Creator Hub could offer subscribers access to professional-quality video recording equipment, lighting kits, kitchen space, and networking opportunities to meet other creators and receive professional support. Hannah E explains, "[T]hat would really work to our advantage [. . . .] These meet ups [would] happen naturally because there is a content creator hub for them, like that's a way to provide support for them." Other creators would arguably welcome a Creator Hub. York-based C7 says, "It would be nice to be able to connect with people who are from your area, instead of just going on to Facebook and talking to someone random to give you advice, having someone to share things." Hannah E implies that a creators' professional association could be formed and establish such Creator Hubs, which evokes Florida's (2022: 28) notion of "neighborhood-based Creator Spaces." Peripheral creators see the potential launch of regional Creator Hubs to enhance networking, collaboration, and community-building in small urban cities, and as a form of strategic resistance to platform moral economies. Creators envision these spaces as countering the competitive and individualistic norms often imposed by global platforms

(Bonini and Treré, 2024; Hallinan et al., 2022). By emphasizing mutual support and cooperation, these creators suggest a way to challenge the neoliberal values that dominate platform moral economies. They highlight the potential for localized initiatives to transform creator economies by prioritizing community over competition.

Unionization and creators' collective organizations

Third, most peripheral creators support unionization, especially given the lack of collective initiatives in their region. Participants suggest that forming a union could provide a concrete foundation for developing resistance strategies within their cities/towns that address their unique struggles. They typically think a creator-specific national collective labor organization with local branches could adopt two key roles.

First, a creator union could *advocate* to help mitigate risks, including perceived legal wrongdoings, underpayment, and pay transparency. Leeds-based Josephine explains that creators need support when negotiating deals leading to "dodgy contracts" to prevent brands from taking advantage of them. Other creators express concerns about long payment waiting times and non-payment. C15 says that a creator union could take "industrial action [to] help make changes amongst brands who [. . .] abuse their power with influencers." York-based Faye suggests that a union could further advocate for creator minimum wages. A creator union could negotiate pay with platform companies and brands, rather than depend on platforms' revenue-sharing models or individually negotiated brand rates. Such pay minimums could offer more transparency and level the playing field for creators. By adopting an advocacy role, York-based Hannah K says that a creator union could effectively become a collective voice "to speak out about the horrific things that [are] going on in the industry without getting their name blacklisted." These findings highlight the role of media unions in advocating for better working conditions and pay through collective bargaining. Peripheral creators perceive these efforts as potential strategic resistance against the prevailing norms of platform economies in which individualism and precarity often undermine workers' rights (Bonini and Treré, 2024; Salamon and Saunders, 2024). By organizing collectively, creators could challenge platform moral economies, pushing for more equitable labor practices.

Second, a union could foster peripheral creator *professionalization*. Unlike platform-driven initiatives like YouTube Spaces, which typically exclude peripheral creators in small urban cities/towns (Bishop, 2018; Cunningham and Craig, 2019), a creator union could offer inclusive training, educate, and share relevant information. Dylan says, "Whether it be, showing us how to edit a video for a while or showing us how to really use the algorithm. Or hosting a workshop where YouTubers of certain sizes can go, again, networking-wise, will be fantastic." In addition, a union could educate creators on their rights, particularly copyright protection and the reuse of creators' works, and assist in drafting legal contracts. This role is especially important, as peripheral creators elsewhere, such as Japan, have been unaware of their rights (Barbetta, 2022). A union could also facilitate city/town-based community networking opportunities. Dylan explains, "They could give us access to their network and I think they can facilitate the building of smaller creators' networks." By extension, Leeds-based C47 thinks that a union could launch accessible spaces, online and offline within cities/towns, where peripheral

creators can unite to discuss their mutual interests. Such initiatives are vital because peripheral creators typically work remotely and "always feel isolated," according to Mirfield-based Deon: "The labor union thing definitely needs to be something to protect us as a whole . . . [W]hy can't we just have someone there to deal with the situation when it occurs, rather than go to another content creator?"

This professional role is significant because it could help creators gain opportunities in their cities/towns. In these testimonies, peripheral creators highlight the potential for unionization to facilitate professionalization by promoting social and collectivist values within creator economies (Bonini and Treré, 2024; Salamon and Saunders, 2024). Creators view unionization as a means to resist the individualistic and precarious nature of global platform labor, envisioning a shift toward a more collaborative and supportive production environment. By foregrounding these values, creators see the potential to transform creator economies into those that prioritize mutual and collective support.

However, some peripheral creators note the difficulties associated with unionization. The term "creator" encompasses a wide range of activities. Hull-based Dane asserts that clear eligibility criteria are needed for creator union membership: "Because if anyone could just pick up and use the phone camera and start doing something, but then if they're entitled to all this stuff just because they've done one 10 second video, it's not the same." Creators also wonder how a union would determine reasonable membership fees and be accessible. Hull-based Simon explains, "[I]f you were going to join some sort of union or it's going to cost you to do it and not everybody can afford to do that, so not everybody's going to join." Moreover, Bradford-based Lewis thinks that a union could negotiate better subscription and viewer criteria with platforms before creators can generate revenue, but individual creators are responsible for building their followings: "the only benefit I could see like a union [. . .] rather than looking at the pay, looking at the requirements more realistically and potentially [. . .] negotiating a better requirement before you can start earning." These comments demonstrate that peripheral creators recognize individualistic values underpinning platform moral economies and perceive the resulting tension between individualism and collectivism (Bonini and Treré, 2024), as illustrated by Leeds-based C19: "I don't really know what [unions] could do for content creators because I think they already have such a freedom of what they're doing. Because they are their own boss." This sentiment highlights a concern that unionization could potentially undermine the individual freedom that creative workers value in platform economies and the prevalence of peripheral creators' existing small-scale everyday (resistance) tactics online (Bonini and Treré, 2024; Cunningham and Craig, 2021; El Marzouki, 2021; Salamon, 2020; Salamon and Saunders, 2024; Soriano and Cabalquinto, 2022).

Discussion and conclusion

This article contributes to a broader understanding of peripheral creator labor within the global platform economy by illustrating how particular constraints and privileges in small urban Western cities/towns shape creators' experiences of precarity and resistance (Bidav and Mehta, 2024). It adds to ongoing discussions about how location shapes creator experiences, highlighting differences in creators' lived experiences across

peripheral small urban areas. This study challenges a binary notion of center-periphery relations and a homogeneous Western user experience in creator economies, identifying shared and distinct labor issues: regional monetization precarity and localized production space and networking precarity, alongside creators' perceptions of platform moral economies (Bonini and Treré, 2024). In addition, it emphasizes creators' perceptions of potential resistance strategies, such as unionization, beyond their everyday tactical resistance actions.

Peripheral creators perceive ways to navigate platform moral economies within their cities/towns, proposing potential resistance strategies to address the unfair distribution of rewards facilitated by platforms (Bonini and Treré, 2024). However, most proposals align with platform economies, accepting their value systems rather than challenging them. This article also illuminates the relative privilege of creators in small English-language Western cities/towns compared to creators in the Global South, who face greater challenges, such as code-switching to boost their audience metrics (Bidav and Mehta, 2024; Duan et al., 2023; Li, 2020; Lin, 2023; Shtern et al., 2019; Zhao, 2024). Yet, the labor of peripheral creators taking place within platform economies in small urban English cities/towns, like rural Chinese vloggers' experiences, perpetuates digital and cultural divides between rural and urban labor or second-tier cities and global hubs. This peripheral creator labor also reinforces metropolitan-second-tier-city gaps (Li, 2020), modifying them with "modern" platform capitalism logics (Duan et al., 2023: 263).

This study extends discussions on what this article terms *monetization precarity*, elucidating how creators in small urban Western locales, though relatively privileged, face regional barriers, including brand deals (El Marzouki, 2021; Iqani, 2019; Soriano and Cabalquinto, 2022). Peripheral creators in Yorkshire negotiate brand deals with national or international English-language clients, benefiting from the United Kingdom's integrated Western market structure. By comparison, peripheral creators in the Global South often work with brands that are influential within their specific regions but lack international reach or resources. This relative privilege, rooted in language and infrastructure, perpetuates broader inequalities within racial platform capitalism (Bidav and Mehta, 2024; Kumar et al., 2021; Soriano and Cabalquinto, 2022; Steinberg et al., 2024; Steinberg and Li, 2017). The concept of monetization precarity also captures an imagined resistance strategy of peripheral creators in small urban Western locales: facilitating regional brand deals.

Furthermore, the concept of *localized production space and networking precarity* developed here identifies Western creators outside major urban hubs as being systematically excluded from material and relational resources critical to platform success (Bidav and Mehta, 2024; Cunningham and Craig, 2019). Peripheral creators in small urban English cities/towns lack opportunities available in big global cities, like London and Dubai, and in Global South countries, like the Philippines, where some creators benefit from local support teams (Bishop, 2018; Cunningham and Craig, 2019; El Marzouki, 2021; Soriano and Cabalquinto, 2022; Zhao, 2016). My findings underscore how exploitative peripheral relations of production in platform capitalisms are shaped by not only race, gender, and language (Kumar et al., 2021; Poell et al., 2022; Soriano and Cabalquinto, 2022; Steinberg et al., 2024; Steinberg and Li, 2017; Zhao, 2021), but also historically entrenched subnational disparities in small urban Western cities/towns (Salamon, 2023). In addition, the concept of production space and networking precarity

encompasses peripheral creators' imagined collective resistance strategies beyond everyday tactical resistance (Bonini and Treré, 2024; Salamon and Saunders, 2024). Creators propose that platforms like YouTube expand inclusion programs in various peripheral cities/towns and that professional associations establish regional Creator Schools and Hubs to increase access to training and networking opportunities (Florida, 2022). However, these proposals recall the relative privilege and precarity between peripheral creators in small urban Western cities/towns and creators in rural areas, particularly in the Global South, where inadequate infrastructure limits similar regional creator interventions (Duan et al., 2023; Li, 2020; Lin, 2023; Zhao, 2024).

In addition, this study contributes potential collective resistance strategies among creators in small urban Western areas, particularly unionization, which contrasts with the short-term resistance tactics documented among peripheral creators elsewhere (Bonini and Treré, 2024). Peripheral creators in small urban English cities/towns believe a creator union could advocate for better pay and working conditions and support professional training and networking opportunities. By centering peripheral creators' perspectives, my study moves beyond previous scholarly research that has not uncovered unorganized creators' perceptions of unionization and their distinct needs (Cunningham and Craig, 2021; Jarrett, 2022; Shiffman, 2022). Nevertheless, this discussion about creator unions highlights another marker of relative privilege and precarity. Peripheral creators in the Global South tend to rely on short-term tactical resistance or strategic resistance aligned with platform economies to survive (Arriagada and Siles, 2024; Soriano and Cabalquinto, 2022; Zhao, 2021), whereas the few notable creator unions have tended to be formed in Western English-language countries (Cunningham and Craig, 2021; Jarrett, 2022).

Future research could build on this study's insights, comparing peripheral creator experiences across diverse global settings and examining how subnational and national locations impact creators' material conditions, platform rewards, and collective resistance strategies. Comparative research could further demonstrate how platform capitalisms amplify or mitigate existing regional disparities, demonstrating the structural aspects of creator labor that transcend a single locale. For example, international comparative studies could examine how subnational and national variations impact creators' working conditions in second-tier cities/towns, including monetization and access to professional training, career development, and collective representation. This study also suggests the need to further explore city/town brand deals in different peripheral regions. In addition, extending a creator workers' inquiry to online ethnographic research could provide insights into subnational creators' and gig workers' everyday experiences and possible strategic resistance actions (Bonini and Treré, 2024; Salamon, 2020; Salamon and Saunders, 2024). Building on the peripheral creator labor approach advanced here, researchers could examine global platform precarity and regional creators' distinct resistance actions tailored to address them.

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Note

1. By May 2019, YouTube had hosted more than 45 Popup Spaces in 23 countries (Weiss, 2019).

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