

# Exploring Mental Health Risk Factors Among Digital Content Creators

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the mental health risk factors experienced by digital content creators, focusing on their occupational, emotional, and social challenges in the context of Tehran, Iran. This qualitative research employed semi-structured interviews with 21 digital content creators residing in Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling and included individuals with at least one year of content creation experience on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was achieved. Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's framework. NVivo software was used to assist in coding and theme development. Thematic analysis revealed four major categories of mental health risk factors: occupational stressors, emotional and psychological impact, social and interpersonal challenges, and platform and audience dynamics. Occupational stressors included algorithmic uncertainty, income instability, and burnout. Emotional risks manifested as anxiety, low self-worth, mood fluctuations, and imposter syndrome. Social challenges involved disrupted personal relationships, isolation, and identity conflict. Platform-specific pressures such as audience expectations, content censorship, algorithm dependency, and performance metric obsession were also prominent. Participants frequently reported emotional exhaustion, fear of irrelevance, and a lack of institutional support structures. These stressors were intensified by the absence of formal workplace protections or mental health resources. Digital content creators face a complex intersection of psychological, social, and platform-driven pressures that significantly impact their mental health. The findings highlight the urgent need for systemic recognition of digital labor and the development of targeted mental health interventions, platform governance reforms, and creator-centered support systems.

**Keywords:** Digital content creators; mental health; occupational stress; social media platforms

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## Introduction

In recent years, digital content creation has transitioned from a niche hobby to a global profession, with millions of individuals leveraging social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube to build personal brands, share creative works, and generate income. This shift has redefined not only the media landscape but also the nature of work, personal identity, and social interaction in the digital age. While digital content creators play a significant role in entertainment, education, advocacy, and marketing

ecosystems, the psychological toll of this highly visible and unstable career path remains an underexplored domain of inquiry. Mental health concerns among content creators are mounting, as they grapple with the pressures of performance, the volatility of platform algorithms, the burden of public scrutiny, and the lack of institutional support (1, 2).

Social media creators, often referred to as influencers, face a paradox: while they are lauded for their entrepreneurial spirit and social influence, they are simultaneously subjected to intense demands that traditional professions seldom encounter. These demands are deeply tied to platform logics—such as algorithmic favorability, engagement metrics, and audience visibility—which continuously fluctuate and are largely opaque to users (3, 4). Such unpredictability leads to job insecurity, emotional exhaustion, and an over-reliance on digital validation for self-worth (5, 6).

Digital labor, particularly among content creators, is often invisible, unregulated, and individualized. Unlike traditional forms of employment, this work lacks formal contracts, legal protections, or access to mental health support services (3). The result is a profession where creators frequently operate in isolation, juggling multiple roles—editor, marketer, strategist, and performer—while maintaining a curated persona that is expected to be authentic yet flawless (7). The strain of managing this duality has been shown to heighten psychological stress and identity conflicts, particularly when online identity diverges significantly from one's offline self (8, 9).

One of the most frequently cited psychological stressors among content creators is the pressure to sustain engagement. The demand for continuous content production and performance can result in long working hours, inadequate rest, and social disconnection, leading to burnout—a state characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment (1, 2). As creators attempt to meet both platform and audience expectations, many report feeling trapped in an unending cycle of relevance-seeking, which often entails producing content not aligned with their personal values or interests (4, 6). This misalignment further erodes intrinsic motivation and exacerbates feelings of dissatisfaction and loss of identity.

The mental health consequences of this digital grind are becoming increasingly evident. Studies have documented heightened anxiety, depressive symptoms, mood instability, and self-doubt among creators who routinely assess their value and success based on views, likes, comments, and follower counts (5, 10, 11). In this context, the "always on" nature of content creation becomes not just a work ethic but a psychological burden that blurs the boundaries between personal life and public visibility (12, 13). The reliance on metrics for social validation reinforces perfectionism and the fear of failure, which in turn leads to mental fatigue and a reluctance to seek help.

For younger content creators, particularly those emerging from adolescent and early adult populations, these issues are even more pronounced. Youth creators are more susceptible to identity diffusion, body image issues, and self-diagnosis tendencies, as they navigate social media spaces where they are both creators and consumers of mental health discourse (14-16). The proliferation of mental health-related content on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram has sparked concerns around the accuracy of information and the potential for misinterpretation and over-pathologization (17, 18). This environment encourages a form of emotional performativity, where creators may feel compelled to share personal struggles as a strategy for audience engagement, further blurring the line between authenticity and emotional labor (19).

Additionally, the challenges of platform governance and algorithmic bias disproportionately affect marginalized creators. Those from minority backgrounds often report shadowbanning, content suppression, and limited visibility despite comparable engagement efforts, leading to perceptions of systemic inequality and psychological marginalization (3, 19). These dynamics reinforce existing societal hierarchies and restrict the capacity of creators from underrepresented groups to fully benefit from digital economies (7).

Despite growing awareness of these issues, institutional and academic responses have lagged. Mental health research in the context of digital content creators remains fragmented and limited in scope. While some interventions have targeted youth audiences through creator-partnered campaigns on mental health awareness (6, 20), there remains a gap in understanding the lived experiences of creators themselves. Research has primarily focused on social media users or adolescent consumers, often overlooking the content producers who shape and sustain these online environments (12, 13). Studies by Westwood et al. (1) and Islamiati (21) underscore the urgent need for a creator-centered mental health framework that accounts for the unique stressors, role conflicts, and identity negotiations inherent in digital content production.

Content creators in non-Western contexts, such as Iran, also remain underrepresented in the literature. Cultural values, political limitations, and platform restrictions may uniquely shape their mental health experiences and coping mechanisms. For instance, creators in conservative or restricted societies often navigate dual pressures: internal community expectations and external platform policies that may not be aligned with local norms (22, 23). This study responds to that gap by focusing on digital content creators based in Tehran, Iran—exploring their perceptions, lived experiences, and reflections on the risk factors affecting their mental health.

This research builds upon prior work examining the intersection of mental health, digital labor, and social media communication. For example, Liu et al. (11) and Motta et al. (10) have shown that training content creators to convey mental health information more responsibly can benefit not only their audiences but also themselves. Yet the question remains: how are creators emotionally and psychologically affected by the platforms they rely upon? As Igben and Acchugbue (24) suggest, the virality-driven nature of social media content accelerates the spread of both information and emotional contagion, amplifying mental health vulnerabilities for both users and creators alike.

This study uses a qualitative approach to explore the mental health risk factors facing digital content creators in Tehran

## Methods and Materials

### *Study Design and Participants*

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the mental health risk factors experienced by digital content creators. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants who self-identified as digital content creators residing in Tehran, Iran. The inclusion criteria required participants to have at least one year of active experience in producing digital content across platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, or TikTok. A total of 21 participants were interviewed, with the sample size determined based on the principle of theoretical saturation—where no new themes or insights emerged from additional data collection.

## Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews to allow for both consistency in questioning and flexibility in exploring participants' individual experiences. An interview guide was developed based on a review of relevant literature and expert consultation in the fields of media studies and psychology. Each interview lasted between 45 to 90 minutes and was conducted either in person or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on participant preference and availability. All interviews were conducted in Persian, audio recorded with participant consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

## Data analysis

Transcribed data were analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. NVivo software was utilized to facilitate the coding process, organization of data, and identification of emerging themes. Initial coding was conducted independently by two researchers to ensure reliability, followed by collaborative refinement of codes and themes. Constant comparison techniques were employed throughout the analysis to identify recurring patterns and ensure coherence across the dataset. All findings were discussed and verified among the research team to enhance analytical rigor and credibility.

## Findings and Results

The study included 21 digital content creators residing in Tehran, Iran. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 38 years, with a mean age of 29.4 years. The sample consisted of 12 women and 9 men. Most participants ( $n = 16$ ) were active on multiple platforms, with Instagram being the most commonly used ( $n = 18$ ), followed by YouTube ( $n = 9$ ) and TikTok ( $n = 6$ ). In terms of professional experience, the majority ( $n = 14$ ) had been producing content for more than two years, while 7 participants had between one and two years of experience. Educational backgrounds varied, with 11 participants holding bachelor's degrees, 7 with master's degrees, and 3 with high school diplomas. Approximately half of the participants ( $n = 10$ ) reported that digital content creation was their primary source of income.

**Table 1. Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts from Thematic Analysis**

Category (Main Theme)	Subcategory (Subtheme)	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Occupational Stressors	Algorithmic Uncertainty	Platform changes, Visibility fluctuations, Performance pressure, Inconsistent reach, Loss of followers
	Income Instability	Irregular payments, Lack of contracts, Brand dependency, Unpredictable sponsorships, Monetization anxiety
	Overwork and Burnout	No boundaries, Content fatigue, Late-night editing, Daily posting, Lack of vacations, Constant engagement
	Job Insecurity	Fear of being replaced, Platform bans, Sudden account loss, Changing trends
	Lack of Support Systems	No HR structure, No peer network, Isolation, No mental health policies
	Pressure to Stay Relevant	Fear of being forgotten, Trend chasing, Identity loss, Creative exhaustion
2. Emotional and Psychological Impact	Online Harassment	Hate comments, Trolling, Personal attacks, Threats, Body shaming
	Anxiety and Fear	Fear of judgment, Performance anxiety, Fear of backlash, Uncertainty about future
	Low Self-Worth	Comparing metrics, Negative feedback, Validation dependency, Self-doubt
	Emotional Exhaustion	Mental fatigue, Emotional disconnection, Constant emotional labor, Feeling drained
	Imposter Syndrome	Feeling unqualified, Doubting success, "Just lucky" mindset

3. Social and Interpersonal Challenges	Mood Fluctuations	Highs and lows, Emotional instability, Dopamine crash, Mood swings due to analytics
	Disrupted Personal Relationships	Work-life imbalance, Family tension, Neglected friendships, Time conflicts
	Isolation and Loneliness	Working alone, Digital detachment, Lack of social interaction, Missed events
	Public Scrutiny	Always being watched, Fear of mistakes, Reputation management, Public expectations
4. Platform and Audience Dynamics	Identity Conflict	Online persona vs. real self, Authenticity dilemmas, Role strain
	Lack of Offline Community	No local creator support, Feeling misunderstood, Digital-only relationships
	Audience Pressure	Pressure to entertain, Responding to DMs, Pleasing the audience, Negative audience influence
	Algorithm Dependency	Content strategy dictated by platform, Obsession with metrics, Algorithmic guessing
	Censorship and Restrictions	Content removals, Platform guidelines stress, Fear of being demonetized, Limiting expression
	Platform Bias and Inequality	Favoring certain creators, Shadowbanning, Regional bias, Engagement inequality
	Performance Metrics Obsession	Follower count anxiety, Refreshing analytics, Dopamine from likes, Numbers over content

The thematic analysis revealed four overarching themes: Occupational Stressors, Emotional and Psychological Impact, Social and Interpersonal Challenges, and Platform and Audience Dynamics. Each theme contains several subcategories capturing the nuanced mental health challenges experienced by digital content creators.

### Occupational Stressors

**Algorithmic Uncertainty:** Participants frequently expressed stress over the unpredictability of platform algorithms. Sudden drops in engagement or visibility were commonly reported. As one participant stated, *“I wake up every day not knowing if my content will reach people or just vanish into the algorithm.”* The lack of transparency in how content is promoted created a persistent sense of insecurity.

**Income Instability:** Many creators highlighted financial unpredictability as a major stressor. Without consistent contracts or income streams, even successful creators felt vulnerable. *“One month I get good money from brand deals, the next it’s zero,”* noted a participant. This financial volatility contributed to anxiety and long-term planning difficulties.

**Overwork and Burnout:** Participants described relentless work routines driven by the demands of content production. The absence of work-life boundaries led to chronic fatigue. A creator shared, *“I haven’t taken a real day off in over a year. There’s always something to post or reply to.”* Burnout was often exacerbated by the self-imposed pressure to remain constantly active.

**Job Insecurity:** Creators voiced fear over the fragility of their career path. Platform bans, shifting trends, and content demonetization were seen as existential threats. *“All it takes is one policy change and everything I’ve built could disappear,”* one participant remarked.

**Lack of Support Systems:** A recurring issue was the absence of structural or emotional support. Unlike traditional workplaces, creators lack organizational backing. *“There’s no HR, no team to help. If I crash, it’s all on me,”* said one interviewee. This lack of safety nets intensified feelings of isolation and vulnerability.

**Pressure to Stay Relevant:** Many creators felt trapped in an endless cycle of trying to stay visible and relevant. This often led to creative exhaustion and identity strain. One participant explained, *“If you’re not trending, you’re forgotten. You can’t stop or slow down.”*

**Online Harassment:** Participants reported exposure to hate speech, trolling, and personal attacks as significant mental health threats. *“Every time I open my DMs, there’s at least one nasty message,”* shared a female creator. The cumulative effect of harassment was emotionally draining and contributed to anxiety and withdrawal.

### **Emotional and Psychological Impact**

**Anxiety and Fear:** Fear of judgment, backlash, and failure emerged strongly. Performance anxiety was common, particularly around new content launches. *“Even posting a simple video gives me anxiety. What if they hate it?”* expressed one participant. This constant fear limited experimentation and authenticity.

**Low Self-Worth:** Many creators admitted tying their self-esteem to metrics and audience responses. Negative feedback or slow engagement often led to self-doubt. *“If a post flops, I start thinking maybe I’m not good enough,”* one said. The need for validation made them emotionally vulnerable.

**Emotional Exhaustion:** The emotional labor of staying positive and engaging with followers was repeatedly described as draining. *“I’m always ‘on’ for my followers, even when I’m mentally falling apart,”* noted a creator. This detachment from genuine emotion contributed to long-term fatigue.

**Imposter Syndrome:** Despite visible success, several participants reported feelings of fraudulence and unworthiness. *“Sometimes I think I just got lucky, and one day people will realize I don’t deserve this,”* said a mid-level influencer. These thoughts were particularly prevalent among newer creators.

**Mood Fluctuations:** Participants described an emotional rollercoaster tied to content performance. Spikes in engagement brought temporary highs, often followed by emotional crashes. One creator shared, *“A viral video makes me feel amazing, but the next day I’m depressed again if the next post doesn’t do well.”*

### **Social and Interpersonal Challenges**

**Disrupted Personal Relationships:** The time-intensive nature of content creation often led to strained personal relationships. One participant said, *“My partner says I’m always online, never really present anymore.”* The blurring of work and personal life caused friction and emotional distance.

**Isolation and Loneliness:** Despite being digitally connected, many creators reported feeling socially isolated. *“It feels like I’m always online but never really with anyone,”* remarked one creator. The solitary nature of content production intensified this loneliness.

**Public Scrutiny:** The pressure of constant visibility led to self-monitoring and fear of error. *“One mistake and everyone’s ready to cancel you,”* said a creator. The need to curate a flawless public persona became a source of stress and hypervigilance.

**Identity Conflict:** Several participants struggled to reconcile their real identity with their online persona. *“Sometimes I don’t even know who I am without my screen name,”* admitted one participant. This split identity created confusion and emotional fragmentation.

**Lack of Offline Community:** The absence of in-person support networks was noted as a challenge. *“I don’t know any other creators in my city. It’s all just online,”* said one respondent. This lack of a physical peer group increased feelings of alienation.

### **Platform and Audience Dynamics**

**Audience Pressure:** Participants described a sense of obligation to satisfy and entertain their audience, often at personal expense. *“Even when I’m sick, I feel like I can’t disappear. They expect me to be there,”* said a creator. This obligation created emotional strain and guilt.



**Algorithm Dependency:** Many participants admitted that their creative process was shaped by platform algorithms. *“I don’t post what I love anymore. I post what I think the algorithm will push,”* explained one creator. This dependence often diluted authenticity and creative satisfaction.

**Censorship and Restrictions:** Some creators expressed frustration with platform policies that limited their expression. *“I’ve had videos removed for no clear reason. It’s like walking on eggshells,”* one participant stated. The stress of navigating unclear rules was compounded by fear of account suspension.

**Platform Bias and Inequality:** Perceived favoritism and shadowbanning emerged as concerns, particularly among minority creators. *“It feels like the algorithm favors certain looks or countries. I’m invisible no matter what I post,”* noted a participant from a marginalized background.

**Performance Metrics Obsession:** The constant tracking of likes, views, and followers created addictive behaviors. *“I refresh my stats every hour. It’s like a drug,”* admitted one creator. This obsession contributed to anxiety, mood swings, and dependency on digital affirmation.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the mental health risk factors experienced by digital content creators in Tehran through a qualitative investigation based on semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed four interrelated thematic categories: occupational stressors, emotional and psychological impact, social and interpersonal challenges, and platform and audience dynamics. Each theme reflected complex emotional realities shaped by the unique conditions of digital labor. In line with the emerging literature, the participants’ narratives illustrated how platform dependency, performance pressure, audience scrutiny, and structural isolation jointly contribute to compromised mental well-being.

The first major theme, *Occupational Stressors*, highlighted the high-pressure nature of content creation driven by algorithmic uncertainty, income instability, overwork, and a general lack of institutional support. Participants expressed distress over the unpredictable performance of content due to opaque algorithmic changes—echoing concerns raised in previous research on shadowbanning and the hidden labor of content management (3). These algorithmic shifts were not only perceived as economically destabilizing but also emotionally disorienting, undermining creators’ confidence and long-term planning. Consistent with findings by Jia (2), creators felt subject to ever-changing platform logics that devalue creative autonomy in favor of metric-driven visibility.

Income instability was another major concern. Many participants viewed digital creation as their primary or sole source of income, yet expressed financial anxiety due to inconsistent revenue streams, lack of contracts, and dependence on sporadic brand deals. This is in line with previous studies that portray content creation as precarious labor lacking the protections afforded by formal employment structures (1, 4). The blurred boundaries between work and leisure also contributed to burnout, a phenomenon well-documented among creators who feel unable to disengage from their platforms without risking audience loss or diminished relevance (5, 6).

Notably, the study found that creators endured these occupational pressures without access to mental health support systems or peer networks, which intensified feelings of professional isolation. This aligns with earlier research showing that creators function in structurally unsupported environments, leading to chronic stress, emotional fatigue, and loss of motivation (3, 7). The lack of institutional frameworks—such

as unions, legal protections, or mental health services—exacerbates the vulnerability of creators, especially in regions with limited recognition of digital labor as legitimate work (22, 23).

The second major theme, *Emotional and Psychological Impact*, revealed how the demands of content creation affect creators' mental health. Participants reported heightened anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and low self-worth—symptoms that are aggravated by constant performance pressure and the volatility of audience engagement. These findings echo research by Liu et al. (11), which showed that creators often internalize audience feedback, leading to emotional highs and lows closely tied to content performance. Moreover, mood fluctuations and symptoms of imposter syndrome were commonly observed, consistent with studies noting that creators experience a sense of fraudulence, especially when they achieve sudden success without institutional validation (10, 18).

Importantly, creators described a phenomenon of emotional dissonance, wherein they felt compelled to maintain an upbeat persona for their audience despite experiencing internal distress. This emotional labor has been identified in other studies as a hidden toll of digital work, especially in influencer cultures where affective expression becomes commodified (8, 13). The emotional cost of being "always on" was particularly evident in statements reflecting exhaustion and feelings of disconnection from one's authentic self. Such emotional dissonance is compounded by a reliance on social media metrics for self-validation, reinforcing cycles of perfectionism and self-doubt (5).

The third theme, *Social and Interpersonal Challenges*, revealed the impact of digital work on creators' personal relationships and social well-being. Many participants reported disrupted relationships, social withdrawal, and loneliness—despite frequent digital interaction. This reflects a growing consensus that social media use, particularly in professionalized contexts, can paradoxically lead to social isolation (12, 14). Creators also described how their online identities began to diverge from their real-life selves, creating tension in maintaining authentic relationships. This identity conflict is similarly reported in studies examining content creators who feel trapped by the personas they've curated for public consumption (7, 21).

Public scrutiny was another important interpersonal stressor. Creators described feeling constantly observed and judged, and feared backlash for missteps or controversial content. These experiences are echoed in literature on cancel culture and digital surveillance, where creators are acutely aware of the potential reputational consequences of their actions (15, 19). This heightened visibility increases vulnerability, as any mistake—intentional or not—can lead to widespread criticism, trolling, or even de-platforming. The psychological impact of this constant self-monitoring can be profound, leading to heightened stress, anxiety, and emotional fatigue (13, 17).

The final theme, *Platform and Audience Dynamics*, focused on how platform design and audience behavior shape creators' mental health experiences. Participants described intense pressure to cater to audience expectations, often feeling responsible for entertaining, educating, or emotionally supporting their followers. This sense of obligation can lead to role strain, especially when creators are expected to produce content that aligns with shifting audience moods or platform trends (6, 20). The emotional labor of engaging with followers—through comments, DMs, and real-time feedback—was frequently described as both rewarding and exhausting.

Creators also expressed frustration over platform censorship, content removals, and perceived algorithmic bias—issues that resonate with findings on governance opacity and discrimination against



marginalized voices (3, 19). The perception that certain creators or content types are favored over others contributed to feelings of helplessness and inequality, particularly among those from underrepresented backgrounds or non-Western contexts. Several participants noted that they modified their content to "appease the algorithm," reflecting findings by Chen and Hsieh (4) on the sacrifice of creative identity for platform survival.

Finally, creators showed signs of compulsive behavior around analytics and performance metrics. Many described checking views, likes, and engagement rates multiple times a day, an obsession supported by studies that explore the neuropsychological impacts of feedback loops embedded in social media platforms (2, 5). The dopamine-reward mechanism tied to performance metrics can heighten addictive behaviors and emotional dependency on digital affirmation, leading to mood instability and a distorted sense of self-worth.

This study is not without limitations. First, the research focused exclusively on content creators based in Tehran, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other cultural or geographical contexts. The unique socio-political and digital environment in Iran may shape creator experiences in ways that differ from those in more open or Westernized digital economies. Second, while qualitative methods provide rich insights into lived experiences, the findings cannot be quantitatively generalized to all digital creators. Lastly, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias, as participants might underreport or overstate certain experiences due to social desirability or memory limitations.

Future studies should consider cross-cultural comparisons to better understand how regional, political, and cultural factors shape the mental health challenges of digital content creators. Comparative research across different platforms could also reveal whether certain platform architectures are more conducive to psychological well-being than others. Additionally, longitudinal research tracking the evolution of mental health over time among creators could provide insight into how burnout develops and how creators adapt or exit the industry. Finally, incorporating mixed-methods approaches, including physiological or behavioral data, could enrich our understanding of the psychological toll of digital labor.

Practitioners, platform designers, and policymakers must consider the well-being of digital content creators as a priority. Platforms should increase transparency around algorithm changes and develop accessible mental health resources tailored for creators. Providing training on sustainable content practices and emotional regulation could empower creators to manage stress and avoid burnout. Educational institutions and professional networks can support emerging creators with tools to navigate the psychological demands of digital work. Most importantly, a culture shift is needed—one that recognizes digital content creation as legitimate labor deserving of the same mental health protections and institutional support as any other profession.

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## Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

## Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

## Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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