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(Anti)Virality Imaginaries in Creator Culture

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Abstract

This paper examines how content creators experience and navigate virality within contemporary social media platform cultures. Drawing on 30 semi-structured interviews with creators in Switzerland and Spain, we conceptualize imaginaries of (anti)virality—the ways creators understand and resist certain forms of viral amplification in favor of controlled, sustained visibility. Contrary to assumptions that creators universally seek maximum reach, our findings reveal that many experience virality as aleatory, detached, and diffuse, leading them to develop strategic practices of resistance against viral attention. Creators describe virality as emotionally destabilizing, detached from their goals, and shaped by platform-specific architectures that make it unpredictable and unsustainable. Creators are selective about the types of visibility they prefer, cultivating loyal niche audiences and maintaining creative autonomy. This study advances creator scholarship by centering lived experiences of virality and revealing how creators negotiate specific forms of visibility rather than pursuing virality as a goal.

Keywords: Content creators; Visibility; Virality; Platforms; Algorithms, Influencers, Social media

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Introduction

In contemporary platform cultures, visibility is often treated as both the primary currency and the assumed aspiration of content creation. Metrics such as views, likes, and follower counts have reinforced the idea that creators invariably seek maximum reach as a marker of success, an assumption running back to early research on participatory cultures (Burgess & Green, 2018). These metrics operate as a form of techno-normative control, in some cases defining creators' self-perceived worth (O'Meara, 2026). Yet this narrative obscures how ambivalently creators relate to visibility, which they experience as a lived condition rather than a straightforward goal. Many actively curate the kinds of visibility they receive, working to shape not only how much attention they attract but what sort. While previous research on the politics of visibility has focused on marginalized creators and controversial content (Abidin, 2022; Duffy, 2023; Glatt, 2023; Stegeman et al., 2024), we show that creators positioned within mainstream platform economies also resist particular forms of viral amplification, favoring visibility that is more controlled and sustained.

Existing research has frequently approached virality through metaphors of contagion and diffusion (cf. Bartal et al., 2020; Guadagno et al., 2013; Popa-Wyatt, 2023), framing it as a quantifiable phenomenon that can be modeled and compared across contexts. While such approaches help explain patterns of circulation, they tend to overlook how virality is experienced and interpreted by creators themselves. We approach virality phenomenologically, centering creators' own perceptions and interpretations. Virality is understood as a subjective experience defined by perceived increases in engagement—views, likes, comments—relative to a creator's usual baseline. This means that virality is not a threshold of absolute reach but a departure from what a creator has come to expect and can therefore be experienced across widely differing follower counts.

Our exploration draws on a growing body of scholarship that foregrounds how users imagine, interpret, and make sense of platform technologies and their effects. Nagy and Neff's (2015) imagined affordances established that users act on both the technical properties and user expectations of what technologies should do. Bucher's (2017) algorithmic imaginary showed that these expectations attach to specific and largely invisible systems, and that they shape behavior whether or not they are accurate. Arriagada and Bishop's (2021) influencer imaginary examines how influencers understand themselves through an ongoing tension between authenticity and commerciality.

Our exploration of (anti)virality imaginaries draws on a growing body of scholarship that foregrounds how users imagine, interpret, and make sense of platform technologies and their effects. We build on Nagy and Neff's (2015) concept of imagined affordances, which highlights the expectations users hold about what technologies should do, as well as the material and affective dimensions of their use, while Bucher's (2017) work on the algorithmic imaginary examines how people perceive and experience algorithms and what these perceptions enable. Arriagada and Bishop's (2021) concept of the influencer imaginary further illustrates how creators understand themselves and their platformed personas through ongoing tensions between authenticity and commerciality.

We advance creator scholarship by conceptualizing imaginaries of (anti)virality: the anticipatory understandings through which creators come to expect viral amplification as misaligned with their work and orient themselves toward more controlled and sustained visibility instead. This orientation is selective. Creators resist specific aspects of virality, such as its unpredictability, audiences, exposure, while sometimes embracing others, such as hostile attention. By focusing on creators whose content is non-controversial, and who occupy relatively secure positions within mainstream platform economies, we show that imaginaries of (anti)virality operate even in the absence of the risks—harassment, discrimination, precarity—highlighted in prior research on marginalized creators' visibility management.

Drawing on creators across diverse content genres in two European countries, Switzerland and Spain, this paper examines how experiences and interpretations of virality shape practices of resistance toward it. We address this through the following research questions: RQ1: How do creators imagine and anticipate virality in their everyday content practices?; RQ2: How do creators understand the role of platforms, audiences, and other actors in shaping their visibility and virality?; RQ3: What strategies do creators develop to manage, redirect, or resist viral amplification?

The paper proceeds as follows. We begin by outlining dominant conceptualizations of virality, reviewing contagion-based models and related approaches that frame virality as a process of rapid circulation. We then turn to research on content creation and visibility to situate virality within broader debates on visibility labor, algorithmic governance, and creators' negotiations of exposure and risk. Following this conceptual grounding, we detail our methodological approach and empirical materials. The analysis is organized around three imaginaries of (anti)virality—aleatory, detached, and diffuse—through which creators

experience and negotiate viral amplification. We conclude by discussing how these findings unsettle the assumption that virality is an unambiguous goal of content creation and reframe it as a lived and negotiated condition of visibility, before outlining implications for future research on platformed attention economies.

Conceptualizing Virality

Research on virality has consistently emphasized the properties of content over those of the people who produce it (Guerini et al., 2011). This orientation has shaped the field's dominant approaches, which largely conceptualize virality through contagion metaphors, emphasizing how content spreads rapidly and extensively across networked publics. Although definitions tend to vary, most converge on the idea of swift propagation enabled by large-scale sharing, and on the analytical position of an observer tracking that spread from above.

The contagion metaphor has been developed in several directions. Guadagno et al. (2013) tie emotional contagion to sharing behavior, arguing that content eliciting strong affective responses—especially content related to group identity—spreads fastest, since the internet lowers the effort of large-scale dissemination even if it does not manufacture the impulse to share. Extending this line of inquiry, Popa-Wyatt (2023) differentiates between simple and complex contagion models to explain the spread of online hate. Whereas simple contagion assumes that ideas or behaviors spread through singular exposures, akin to viral infection, Popa-Wyatt demonstrates that hate acquisition is cumulative, emerging through repeated encounters and sustained engagement. This process, they argue, is more accurately captured by a complex contagion framework.

Connolly (2025) situates virality within a hybrid, multiplatform media environment, emphasizing that viral content circulates across platforms and adapts to each platform's distinct affordances. Conventional approaches such as network analysis and epidemiological contagion models prioritize quantitative indicators—likes, shares, and views—which Connolly argues cannot capture the creative, adaptive, and iterative dimensions of contemporary virality. They therefore extend contagion models to account for overlapping exposures and the re-emergence of content long after its initial peak, shaped by the interplay between platform logics and content features. Complementing this perspective, Bartal et al. (2020) distinguish between local (neighbor-to-neighbor) and global contagion dynamics in online social networks. They argue that virality cannot be reduced to a simple binary of

popularity versus obscurity; rather, it unfolds through varied spatial and temporal patterns of diffusion, many of which can be anticipated by examining early-stage spread behaviors.

Moving beyond contagion-based models, Nahon and Hemsley (2013) conceptualize virality as a form of networked information flow, emphasizing speed, temporality, and cross-network circulation rather than infection-like spread alone, a perspective that has been influential in internet studies. Shifman (2014) refines this account by drawing on Berger and Milkman's (2012) six factors associated with viral success of memetic content, of which positivity, the tendency to share uplifting content, proves especially influential. However, the relevance of positivity is highly context-dependent, as political, journalistic, and activist content often diverges in tone and affect from commercially driven viral material.

Across these approaches, virality is observed from outside. It is traced, modeled, and predicted as it moves through networks, but it is not examined as something that happens to someone. These accounts exclude what virality means for the creator behind the content. Examining that means turning from circulation to the broader conditions of visibility surrounding creators' work.

The visibility-virality spectrum in content creation

Virality research has largely centered on the circulation of content, considering its speed and scale within and across platforms. Visibility, by contrast, is treated more instrumentally, as a matter of attention, reach, or success; a desirable outcome to be maximized, accumulated, or leveraged via “visibility games” that are shaped by creators' perceptions of the rules within platform environments and negotiated relationally or performatively (Cotter, 2019). Increased visibility has been identified as a key marker of online success (Abidin, 2016), and characterized as the sense of being favored by the algorithm, which shapes behaviors online (Duffy & Meisner, 2023). But the types of visibility creators seek depend on how they measure value and success (Arriagada & Valderrama, 2025; Arrieta, 2025), and on their perception of risk (Stegeman et al., 2024).

Visibility has been characterized in various ways: as perception (being seen using the sense of sight), as recognition (through gaining relative power by being seen), as control (through loss of power due to the negative consequences of being seen), and as spectacle (through performance or display of the self, aimed at increasing attention) (Brighenti, 2010). Online visibility has been further characterized as asymmetrical—meaning that a producer of content can be seen by many without necessarily being able to see them—and culturally

mediated by assumptions that shape how something is understood (Thompson, 2005). Barta and Andalibi (2024, p. 23) distinguish factors that shape content visibility (interaction metrics, network characteristics), factors that shape personal visibility (openness, audience characteristics, creator activity), and algorithms, which act as visibility agents affecting content, identity, and creators. O'Meara (2026) shows that metrics related to visibility carry an ambivalent meaning for influencers, as they are both imposed by platforms and other actors and internalized by creators.

Creators depend on being seen and engaged with to build audiences, gain recognition, or generate income through what Abidin (2016) terms visibility labor—the embodied work of self-presentation aimed at becoming legible and prominent to relevant audiences and institutions. Because visibility and virality are interdependent but not equivalent, seeking virality constitutes its own form of labor (Mears & Beauvais, 2025). Creators must continually negotiate how, when, and to what extent they make themselves visible or viral (Arrieta, 2025), through strategic self-presentation, boundary-setting, or concealment (Duffy & Meisner, 2023). As Gillespie (2018) argues, such decisions about when to be seen and when to remain deliberately unseen are where power, identity, and platform infrastructures become entangled in the politics of visibility.

For vulnerable creators, visibility can be paradoxical. Jaramillo-Dent et al. (2022) identify practices of algorithmic (in)visibility through which immigrant creators strategically modulate their content to avoid takedowns while still reaching niche audiences. Heřmanová et al. (2025) conceptualize a related dynamic as ambivalent visibility, describing the conditions faced by creators in war zones. For these creators, visibility is ethically charged: while documenting violence is urgent, achieving algorithmic legibility requires adopting platform-native formats such as memes. In this context, visibility is simultaneously enabling and fraught—it expands the reach of witnessing while heightening the risks of trivialization, exploitation, and endangerment. Moreover, Glatt (2023) demonstrates how creators from marginalized backgrounds confront the intimacy triple bind: heightened exposure to harassment, increased pressure to perform emotional connections, and fewer opportunities for monetization. In response, they restrict engagement with hostile followers, shift interactions to private or semi-private spaces, or disable comments altogether. Stegeman et al. (2024) capture this most directly through hyper(in)visibility, showing how sexual content creators strategically oscillate between visibility and obscurity to mitigate risk.

Building on this work, we analytically separate visibility from virality by treating viral amplification as embedded within broader, everyday regimes of visibility labor. Whereas virality is experienced as a spike relative to creators' own baseline, visibility functions as a more durable and cumulative condition, which involves a more stable sense of standing within one's community or domain, actively cultivated, strategized, and monitored (Barta & Andalibi, 2024), that in turn shapes how creators interpret viral amplification when it occurs. Because a spike is measured against that accumulated position, the same amplification can become an opportunity for one creator and a disruption for another, depending on what they have built and what the spike does to it.

This distinction helps explain divergent findings. Extending the focus from suppression to amplification, Mears and Beauvais (2025) propose a phenomenology of virality based on high-performing creators working as independent contractors for so-called "content farms." In these contexts, virality becomes the central objective, particularly on ad-driven platforms such as Facebook, and is experienced as pleasurable and, in some cases, addictive—an affective state actively cultivated through platform design features. For these creators their work is contracted, their online personas are often disposable, and their income tied directly to volume. In contrast, the present paper examines how mainstream creators operating within dominant platform ecosystems, whose livelihoods depend on cultivated audiences and durable positions, experience and make sense of virality as they navigate contemporary attention economies.

Methods

Procedure

This paper draws on a larger qualitative project examining creators across content genres and their beliefs about the actors and aspects of their social media ecosystem, including non-rationality, mysticism, and enchantment. The project combined 30 semi-structured interviews, conducted in person or via video conferencing according to participants' preferences, between May 2024 and July 2025. Interviews were complemented by a visual mapping elicitation method in which participants were asked to visually map the actors they perceived as shaping their platform ecosystems. In this paper, we focus specifically on creators' perspectives on and experiences of (anti)virality and examine ecosystem actors as they relate to these experiences. Moreover, we do not report the full results of the visual elicitation exercise here; these are analyzed and discussed in detail in a separate publication.

Data Collection

To identify creators in each region (Spain and Switzerland) we established clear inclusion criteria prior to recruitment. Eligible participants had at least 5,000 followers on Instagram or TikTok and posted content regularly (at least once per month, though most interviewees posted weekly or more frequently). These criteria resulted in a sample of creators operating within mainstream platform economies whose identities and content were not predominantly positioned within structurally marginalized or high-risk visibility contexts. Recruited participants had followings ranging from 8,500 to 4 million across their used platforms. The subjective nature of virality means that at any level of popularity the experience of virality can occur regardless of follower count, since what defines the experience of virality to a creator is the magnitude of departure from their own baseline rather than any fixed threshold of absolute reach.

Creators who met our criteria were recruited using established methods in creator studies: we first contacted creators directly via private messages and email and we relied on snowball sampling to identify additional participants. Participants were invited to discuss their experiences and beliefs related to various aspects of content creation. The topic of virality emerged in the first interview, in response to questions related to creators' career trajectories, their relationship with diverse ecosystem actors, and their perspectives of platform dynamics. Considering the interesting perspectives of the first participant about virality, we incorporated a dedicated question on experiences with virality into the interview and Twenty-nine of thirty participants were therefore asked about virality directly.

Participating creators received an economic incentive of 100 CHF in Switzerland and 100 EUR in Spain, which served as remuneration for their time and associated costs. The incentive reflected several factors: the length of the interviews (up to 120 minutes), the hard-to-reach nature of this research population, the freelance status of most content creators—which limits availability for unpaid activities—and our aim to include creators across a wide range of follower counts. The amount is consistent with rates offered by research companies in Switzerland for qualitative studies with similar characteristics. The incentive was disclosed in the recruitment materials and consent form, and participants were informed that it did not compromise the voluntary nature of their participation, in line with established ethical guidance (Masoumi, 2024). We contacted 342 creators across both countries, resulting in 30

interviews: 15 conducted in Switzerland and 15 in Spain, spanning diverse creator typologies and content genres (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participant data.

COUNTRY	PSEUDONYM	CONTENT GENRE	#FOLLOWERS ACROSS PLATFORMS	PLATFORMS USED	AGE	GENDER
SPAIN	José	Comedy	41144000	IG, TKTk, YT	24	M
	Néstor	Mental health / self-help books	21697900	IG, TKTk, YT	30	M
	Ricardo	News	2894500	IG, TKTk, YT	38	M
	Marco	Beauty	359440	IG, TKTk, YT	29	M
	Arturo	Medicine, Nutrition	293700	IG, TKTk	34	M
	Claudio	Vegan cooking	174500	IG, TKTk, YT	26	M
	Mercedes	Lifestyle	166760	IG, TKTk, YT	24	F
	Alexander	Reproductive health	139683	IG, TKTk, YT	35	M
	Julia	Music and Celebrities	117400	IG, TKTk, YT	31	F
	Yvette	Financial planning	112062	IG, TKTk	39	F
	Viviana	Travel	78500	IG, TKTk	47	F
	Mariana	Fashion, lifestyle	67750	IG, TKTk, YT	31	F
	Lina	History: focus on vikings	44462	IG, TKTk	38	F
	Elena	Travel: Diving and photography	28000	IG, TKTk	35	F
	Adrian	Makeup/beauty	25158	IG, TKTk, YT	36	M
SWITZERLAND	Anna	Digital Products	436000	IG, TKTk, YT	21	F
	Lucas	Travel	136200	IG, TKTk, YT	31	M
	Octavia	Lifestyle and expat life	131600	IG, TKTk, YT	32	F
	Samuel	Comedy	127559	IG, TKTk, YT	36	M
	Magdalena	Photography/lifestyle	102100	IG, LDN	58	F
	Marcus	Comedy	94250	IG, TKTk, YT	38	M
	Jasmine	Teaching	61742	IG, TKTk, YT	29	F
	Rebecca	Travel and food	41509	IG, TKTk, YT	32	F
	Cassandra	Information for expats	41073	IG, TKTk	26	F
	Frederik	Politics	36342	IG, TKTk, YT	28	M
	Axel	Music/Lifestyle	24358	IG, TKTk, YT	22	M
	Jane	Food and lifestyle	22123	IG, TKTk	28	F
	Mackenzie	Lifestyle	17569	IG, TKTk, YT	23	F
	Lauren	Business/entrepreneurship	16200	IG, LDN	35	F
	Rachel	Music/podcast producer	8584	IG	32	F

Participants ranged in age from 21 to 58 and included 17 women and 13 men. Interviews were conducted by native speakers in Swiss German (n = 4), English (n = 11), and Spanish (n = 15). All participants provided informed consent in accordance with the University of Zurich Ethics Committee's requirements. Consent forms detailed the study's aims, recording procedures, data storage and use, the voluntary nature of participation, the incentive amount,

and the pseudonymization of quotes prior to publication. These points were discussed with participants before each interview to ensure clarity and address any questions or concerns.

The two national contexts were selected for comparative purposes in the broader project, though we do not analytically differentiate between them here because in our data related to (anti)virality imaginaries, these differences do not shape the form the imaginaries take: aleatory, detached, and diffuse orientations appeared in comparable terms across both contexts. We have mentioned aspects related to the national context when they are relevant throughout the findings section, and we have provided quotes that illustrate how similar imaginaries emerge in both contexts. The examination of the deterritorialized nature of virality in the diffuse imaginary should not be confused with this dual-country sampling—what creators describe is how broad they want their reach to be, and it happens regardless of the country in our sample, as explained in the findings.

The positionality of authors also had a role informing the selection of cases, for instance by language accessibility, as two of the authors are native speakers of Spanish and German. Interviews were conducted by the first author, a female native Spanish speaker originally from Latin America who lived in Spain for several years, and by a research assistant, a female Swiss native speaker of Swiss German. The analysis was carried out with three additional authors, a female native Swedish speaker, a male native Hebrew speaker, and a male native German speaker and resident in Switzerland for over fifteen years. This meant that interpretations produced by researchers close to the context were routinely tested by researchers outside it.

This article focuses on creators' experiences of virality and visibility. The interview protocol was structured around seven thematic blocks: (1) demographic information; (2) content creation trajectories and self-perceptions; (3) a visual elicitation activity mapping the key actors within each participant's preferred-platform ecosystem; and beliefs, practices, and experiences related to (4) platforms; (5) audiences; (6) creator communities; and (7) other actors or phenomena that participants identified as significant to their work.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed using AI-assisted tools: Notta for in-person interviews and Zoom's built-in transcription function for virtual interviews. Each transcript was subsequently reviewed and corrected by a native speaker of the interview's original language through close

listening to the audio recordings. Only excerpts selected for inclusion in the paper were translated into English. Data analysis was conducted using MAXQDA24 and followed a hybrid approach combining deductive and inductive coding, employing reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Rather than aiming for saturation across participants when examining virality, we follow Braun and Clarke's (2021, p.210) approach to generating meaning through thick and rich data collection and interpretative analysis where additional interpretations are always possible. In our case, our analysis contributes knowledge and nuance about creators' experiences with virality and differentiates it from other forms of visibility studied in previous research through the proposal of three (anti)virality imaginaries.

Data were analyzed iteratively, beginning with open coding and followed by successive rounds of analysis that assessed the conceptual coherence of emerging codes and themes. Interviews were primarily coded by the first author, with themes refined reflexively through ongoing discussion within the team of authors. References to virality appeared in two main ways: first, in response to questions about creators' trajectories and career development; and second, in response to the explicit question on virality. In the sections that follow, we outline the diverse ways interviewees made sense of virality and the strategies they articulated in relation to it, which we conceptualize as imaginaries of (anti)virality.

Findings and Discussion

We turn now to our interviews to examine how creators work with or against visibility and virality in their everyday routines. We organize our findings around three imaginaries of (anti)virality (aleatory, detached, and diffuse) and within each section we respond to our three research questions. When attempting to make sense of viral instances, creators develop imaginaries based on the characteristics of viral visibility when compared with their normal levels of visibility and the positive/negative emotions attached to these experiences, which lead to avoidance among some creators. Figure 1 outlines the resulting forms of visibility and virality alongside their associated (anti)virality imaginaries and strategies.

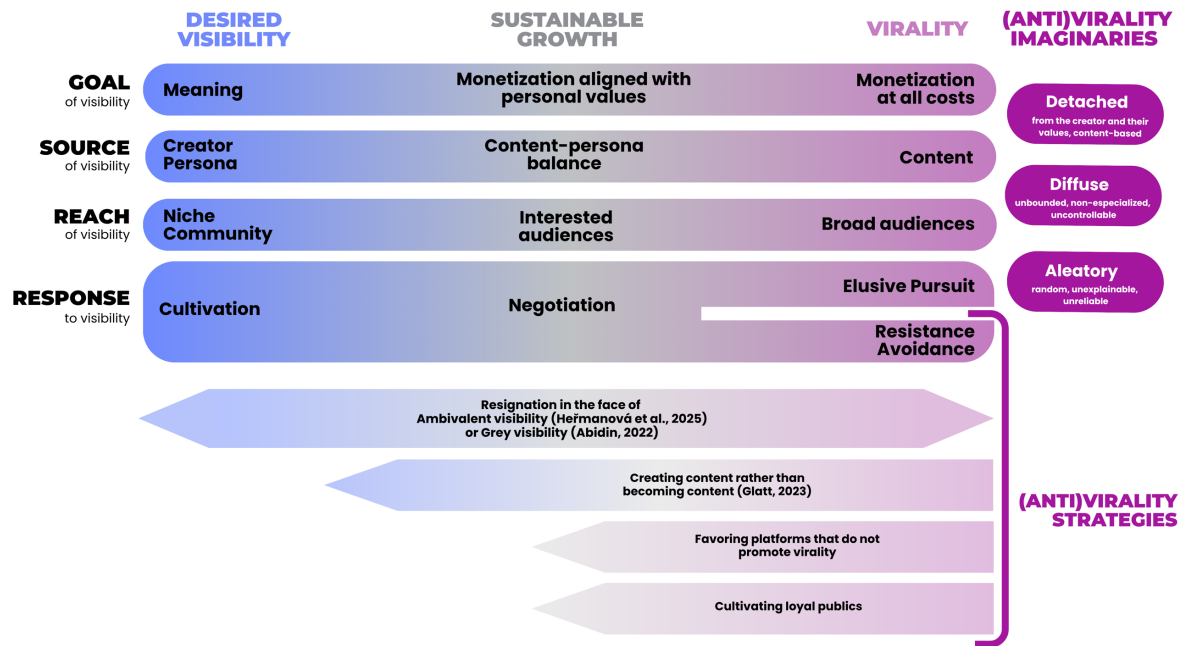


Figure 1. The visibility-virality spectrum, (anti)virality imaginaries and strategies. Created by the Authors.

Virality as Aleatory

For many creators who rely on brand deals and public recognition, virality appears to promise improved working conditions and monetization opportunities. Creator research has extensively examined how increased visibility shapes such possibilities (Duffy & Meisner, 2023), often characterizing visibility as something creators can strategically manage—either through modulating self-consciousness in pursuit of specific goals (Abidin, 2016) or by regulating intimacy and exposure in relation to audiences (Glatt, 2023). These approaches assume some control over visibility, an assumption disrupted for creators who anticipate amplification they cannot produce (RQ1) and who develop strategies in response (RQ3). Several interviewees described virality as elusive (Figure 1), driven more by luck than skill and largely impossible to engineer, noting:

“It's like a lottery ticket. The more lottery tickets you have, the more likely your video will go viral. A lottery ticket is a video that goes viral. [...] If [a TikTok video] goes viral, that's great. If you go viral again and again, more and more pieces of paper with your name on them are thrown into the raffle.” (Axel, 22, male, music and lifestyle influencer, Switzerland)

By invoking a raffle as a metaphor, the creator highlights that virality depends not only on the individual video but also on the continuous generation of content. An established presence on platforms such as TikTok increases the odds of future viral exposure, giving some creators, as they put it, more “tickets” in the draw. This reflects the dependence that characterizes creators’ relationship with platforms, to consider the role of virality, where creators feel the pressure to generate content continuously as a requirement to be favored by the platform (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020; Duffy & Meisner, 2023). Moreover, participants describe virality as enjoyable in a first instance, as the quantifiable metrics of content creation—views, likes, and shares—momentarily become a source of validation and excitement. However, as this peak subsides, many reported feelings of emptiness and disillusionment. As one creator put it, the experience of sudden visibility resembled a “dopamine” hit that inevitably wears off, leaving behind emotional strain.

“Of course, because keep in mind that when a video is doing really well, it's dopamine. I suddenly gained 70,000 followers on Instagram in one day. Right. But of course, all of a sudden, you have maybe 2 weeks that you're trying to do the same thing. And it's not that you don't just gain followers, you lose them. It's that you lose, I lost 500 in one day. And that, of course, either I work on it little by little, or it affects me, to be honest, it has affected me in the past.” (Néstor, 30, male mental health and motivation influencer, Spain)

This cyclical experience of excitement and promise followed by disillusionment strongly shapes creators’ imaginaries of virality. Whereas the initial experience of virality echoes accounts from creators working in content farms, who describe viral success as producing sensations akin to a drug-induced high (Mears & Beauvais, 2025), the subsequent drop in engagement generated anxiety and a perceived pressure to reproduce virality, which some creators described as becoming “obsessive.” Over time, this dynamic diminished their ability to enjoy aspects of content creation they valued more highly, such as creative exploration, self-expression, and the autonomy of their work. Some creators cope with the aleatory nature of virality by accepting it as inherent to platform work, noting:

“I've had moments where I've been very frustrated, very bad in terms of numbers, saying: why don't my videos go viral, such and such, and how do I wake up the next day and think: well, it doesn't really matter. The

social media world is like that. It's got a lot of ups and downs [...], but that's life, really. So it's like, from one moment to the next, my mind changed, clicked, and I started to enjoy it a little more. So I think that the fact that sometimes you do badly in networks or in life in general makes you take things in a different way afterwards.” (José, 24, male, comedy influencer, Spain)

This type of resignation echoes previous work examining marginalized creators’ responses to algorithmic moderation as a form of invisibility (Duffy & Meisner, 2023). In José’s case however, resignation is directed not at invisibility but at the inability to replicate virality: having initially struggled with its aleatory nature, he now approaches it with resignation. This shift illustrates how creators come to internalize the pressure to go viral, an expectation rooted in the belief that wide reach and heightened visibility are central to influencer success (cf. Arriagada & Bishop, 2021), even as that virality proves difficult to reproduce. In our interviews, creators acknowledged this pressure while simultaneously articulating a resistance to being governed by metrification measures, noting:

“There are times when it comes like you have pressure. And other times it doesn't. Today I do what I want to do. I mean, I do what I want. If a video reaches 5,000,000 views, great. If it stays at 30, [or] 1,000, great too.”
(Néstor, 30, male, mental health and motivation influencer, Spain)

Notably, larger creators like Néstor and José don't characterize the absence of virality as invisibility, but as the failure to sustain elevated metrics after a viral instance. This contributes to arguments about online invisibility, since it reflects how experienced, full-time creators with larger followings relate differently to platform dependence and visibility. In their perspective, virality is destabilizing because it is hard to reproduce. Even for these, more established, mainstream creators, virality fails to improve working conditions in a consistent and achievable way, as it operates unevenly across the platform, underscoring its status as an uncertain and unreliable goal for creators.

Virality as Detached

Participants describe virality as detached from their habitual content creation. The detached imaginary of (anti)virality involves three dimensions in the visibility-virality spectrum (Figure 1): viral content as detached from usual creator content, viral audiences as detached from

desired audiences (niche and interested), and viral amplification as detached from amplification aligned with creator meaning and values—dimensions that surface the strategies creators develop when amplification misaligns with their work (RQ3), and the role audiences play in shaping those strategies (RQ2).

In our interviews, creators emphasized that viral content was often experienced as qualitatively different from their usual content, frequently addressing topics or adopting formats that diverged from their established genres. Julia characterizes this distinction: for her, viral content lacks a valuable contribution, leading to ephemeral forms of attention (reflecting the detached audiences in the imaginary) that she differentiates from original content, which in her perspective, attracts more loyal audiences:

“Well, that video will be seen today. It will go viral today and tomorrow, and they will forget about you because you haven't contributed anything. And yet, the moment you do something original, people might want to see more of you and want to know more about you simply because you've changed their minds. [...] One content builds loyalty, and the other does not.” (Julia, 31, female, music and celebrity analysis influencer, Spain)

These different types of attention are consequential because audience composition shapes what creators can sustain over time. Beyond originality in content, outrage is a strong driver of attention and monetization for influencers, a dynamic recent scholarship terms "rage bait" (Shin et al., 2025). Some of our participants considered any attention, including hate, as valuable attention. This is the case of José, a 24-year-old influencer in Spain, who states that “haters are really necessary, [because] those who criticize are always there. So what does that do? It generates interaction.” This perspective reflects the ambivalence of (anti)virality in José's rejection of some aspects of virality (its aleatory nature) and his embrace of hate as an acceptable form of interaction. José has over 4 million followers across his platforms, and although he accepts interactions from hateful actors, he also experiences frustration when reflecting about the audiences attracted by viral content,

“It's frustrating, because you don't know if those 100,000 followers are actually loyal or not, so your account is growing a lot, but it can have a downside, because you can say, dude, like someone with 1,000,000 followers only gets 5,000 likes. And that's because I gained 100,000 followers from one video that people liked. But they're not people who

had seen my videos before, or who are going to keep watching my videos afterward, just because of one video, and so you end up with 100,000 followers who don't do anything with your account.”

This reflects how viral publics are perceived as distanced from the creator and their habitual content, driving the detached (anti)virality imaginary. Aligned with the perceived dangers of detachment, creators prioritize building loyal publics who appreciate and engage with their content over time. This orientation toward sustained connection was shaped by a desire to avoid the risks associated with viral exposure, including critical comments and hostile audiences, which they recognize as valuable in terms of growth, but consider as detached from their values. José reflects the ambivalence of (anti)virality, whereas for Elena, a travel influencer in Spain, her reactions to virality are informed in part by concerns about attracting “haters”:

"I never get into conflicts. [...] I do give my opinion on some more controversial topics, but I usually try not to get into topics that I know are going to generate hate and such. It is a very good way to grow, because the haters are the biggest followers. But it's not my style."

In this sense, virality can draw in unintended audiences who are detached from the creator's target public. When asked to elaborate about the kinds of topics she deliberately avoids for this reason, Elena explained:

“Well, everything from politics to, well, for example, sometimes I have received some comments that were a bit macho or sexist, or picking on my appearance.”

These practices reflect strategic visibility management (Jaramillo-Dent, 2022), shaping how creators decide what to create and share. To avoid unwanted attention triggered by virality, many deliberately steered clear of controversial topics. Such choices also function as boundary-making strategies, aligning with Glatt's (2023) argument that creators often prioritize creating content instead of becoming the content themselves. It is well-established that female creators experience more intense negative experiences online (Glatt, 2023; Stegeman et al., 2024) and our fieldwork supports this, as reflected in the misogynistic nature of Elena's experience and how different it is from the aspects of viral amplification that male creators tend to reject. In this context, concealing political or contentious aspects of the self

becomes a way of resisting viral exposure. Interviewees articulated this stance explicitly, positioning their avoidance of virality as a deliberate and principled orientation, stating:

“I am not at all in favor of virality, and I have had viral content. I've had moments of a lot of exposure, which are very dangerous. [...] because usually the content that goes viral is very specific content [...] [content that] doesn't fully represent what you actually want to do on social media [...] And all of a sudden, you can attract an audience that really, when they see your actual daily content, they're not going to be interested in it because they thought it was funny. [...] So, my experience with virality, I believe that you don't have to be content. [...] But people make content, just thinking about going viral, that's what I was telling you about obscurity and people looking for a super celebrity, and you lose coherence.” (Mariana, 31. Fashion and lifestyle influencer, Spain)

Mariana describes three dimensions of the detached imaginary of (anti)virality: viral content as detached from a creator's usual content, viral audiences as detached from sustainable audiences, and viral amplification as detached from creator persona (e.g., what a creator really wants to do with their content). She rationalizes her (anti)viral approach to content creation by positioning other creators as ecosystem actors who foster competition and comparison, thereby validating an (anti)virality stance over virality-seeking at all costs. This illustrates how the (anti)viral imaginary operates in practice, exemplifying the dimensions of the visibility-virality spectrum (Figure 1).

Virality as Diffuse

TikTok disrupted earlier paradigms of social media visibility by introducing algorithmic systems that push content beyond a creator's existing follower base, privileging content-based virality over persona-based popularity (Abidin, 2021). Instagram has since followed this trajectory, a process often described as the "TikTokification" of social media platforms (Agile Brand Guide, 2024), reflecting broader tendencies toward converging formats and algorithmic visibility logics across platforms. This shift, in which platform architectures, commercial intermediaries, and geographic markets increasingly shape creators' visibility and virality (RQ2), is at the core of the diffuse (anti)virality imaginary: for many creators, virality is

imagined as unbounded, uncontrollable, and reaching broader publics than desired, with strategic implications examined below (RQ3).

The diffuse imaginary differs from the aleatory imaginary in that it concerns not the difficulty of achieving virality but the perceived lack of control once virality happens. It is related to detachment insofar as diffusion involves detached elements, but it more specifically captures the structural conditions of virality, the way it shifts content from a niche, specialized level of popularity into a broader, generalist space, risking the loss of what makes niche tastes valuable. An additional difference is that the detached imaginary often leads to rejection of virality as a whole, whereas the aleatory and diffuse imaginaries reflect the rejection of certain types and characteristics of virality.

Among our participants, the diffuse imaginary of (anti)virality took two forms: platformed, where specific platform infrastructures take control away from creators' negotiations of visibility; and deterritorialized, where content moves beyond the markets where creators want to grow. Participants repeatedly distinguished platforms by the tone of the audiences they attract. Arturo, comparing Instagram and TikTok comment sections, described the latter as less careful and more aggressive:

“I think on Instagram, the community is a little bit more welcoming, you know? A little bit nicer. They post nicer comments, so to speak, [...] on TikTok, maybe the video goes viral and reaches people who don't even follow you, and so on, or maybe people are less careful when it comes to posting comments, you know. A little bit more aggressive when it comes to posting comments.” (Arturo, 34. Medicine and nutrition influencer, Spain)

The conditions under which virality and visibility emerge, and the characteristics of the audiences and interactions they attract, differ across the platforms on which creators operate, a point repeatedly emphasized by interviewees. Reflecting on these configurations, creators discussed how platform-specific affordances, communicative norms, and community dynamics shape their experiences of virality and their strategies for managing visibility, Samuel (Comedy influencer in Switzerland) explains what he favors and seeks from Instagram,

“Instagram is my favorite because it gives me the best access to the community. I can get the audience to interact with stories. People can write DMs. The exchange is even closer than on other platforms. Which makes Instagram my favorite. [...] I have the feeling that the community on Instagram is more connected to the creator. I see that in the comments [...] It's often the same people who comment. With the DMs, you create even more of a connection. I have more people writing DMs on Instagram. I feel like, speaking about the general or the big picture, Instagram is the most sociable platform.”

Samuel's reflection illustrates the characteristics of desired audience interactions that enable a deeper connection with the creator. It highlights the role of the platform in enabling these relationships to develop through a range of interaction possibilities. Within the diffuse (anti)virality imaginary, the platform acts as a mediating actor, one that enables more controlled forms of engagement through a range of interactions (as reflected by Samuel) or a diffuser (e.g., TikTok according to Arturo). The diffuse imaginary expands on the perception of detachment from audiences by illustrating platforms mediating the development of (un)desirable audiences, as discussed below.

“I hate it so bad. I hate the people there. They're so toxic. I only use TikTok to recycle, like, I create one piece of content. I upload to multiple platforms. People give you really shitty comments on TikTok, and they're always negative. So I engage a lot more with my audience on Instagram and YouTube. Because these are really, like, real people following me. But on TikTok, because your content is pushed out to anybody. It can be anybody in the world watching you. That doesn't know you. And they're just commenting because, like, they have nothing better to do, and they're so toxic. So I really dislike TikTok. I mean that. That's my personal opinion. Yeah.” (Octavia, 32. Lifestyle and expat life influencer, Switzerland)

Although interviewees consistently described TikTok as the platform most strongly associated with virality, viral visibility on TikTok does not readily translate into monetization in many geographic contexts. Notably, the TikTok Creator Program is unavailable in both Switzerland

and Spain (TikTok, 2025), whereas the YouTube Partner Program operates in both countries (YouTube, 2025). These differences in monetization structures shape how creators evaluate, pursue, or resist viral exposure across platforms, as one interviewee explained:

“I don't know whether I like it or not, I mean, if there is a video that has more views, well, that's fine. I would like it to be on YouTube, because that's where they give me money. (...) For example, the other day, the last drone video on TikTok had around 1,000,000 views. Well, it's good, I'm excited, but I don't care, because I mean, it does not represent having more. I mean, it doesn't affect my life at all; they do not become subscribers.” (Ricardo, 38, News influencer, Spain)

His account underscores, once again, the unsustainability of viral publics, while also showing that creators' orientations toward virality shift across different moments of the viral process. Ricardo's account marks a boundary of the (anti)viral orientation and the aspects of virality that are rejected. He does not turn down amplification but wants it elsewhere, on a platform where views produce income. This differs from creators who describe having had viral content and not wanting it again, as reflected among creators with detached imaginaries.

Spikes in attention can trigger platform safeguards when viral activity is flagged as resembling automated or bot-like behavior, leading to temporary warnings or account restrictions (Stricklin & McBride, 2020), as Magdalena describes.

“You know, about four years ago, I had [...] a post on LinkedIn that went totally nuts, also viral. Within a couple of days, I had 100,000s of views and 2,000 contact requests. I was like, ‘Oh, wow, very cool.’ And I just tried to get these contacts, and then LinkedIn [...] warned me. They're like, you have too much activity. You can't use your channel now for a few hours.” (Magdalena, 58. Photography and lifestyle influencer, Switzerland).

Virality is experienced as an uneven phenomenon shaped by a variety of conditions. For some, it provides visibility without corresponding material benefit; for others, it introduces disruptions that feel more like risk than opportunity. In this sense, virality appears less as a stable pathway to success than as a diffuse condition continually shaped by platforms'

governance structures, distribution logics, and affordances. As Sujon et al. (2025) argue, platforms may facilitate prosocial interaction while simultaneously operating through extractive and exploitative logics that reconfigure publics into anti-publics and co-opt user activity for private gain.

Platform architectures also shape the commercial value of visibility. Rather than seeking exposure to an undifferentiated mass audience, several interviewees across both countries preferred visibility within specific geographic publics, noting the limited usefulness of certain forms of geolocated visibility that do not translate into meaningful engagement or economic opportunity.

“It doesn't do me any good if my video goes viral in America because that's not my target audience. And my customers don't benefit from those views at all because they're local brands. And I don't think more is always better.” (Jane, 28. Food influencer, Switzerland)

This finding aligns with previous research showing that creators' offline brand relationships impose specific commercial pressures, requiring them to appeal to well-defined publics in order to remain attractive to local advertisers (Jaramillo-Dent & Divon, 2025). It also illustrates broader practices in influencer marketing in these two countries, as reflected in agencies that include the identification of the geographic location of influencer followers as part of their services in Switzerland and Germany (Kontx, n.d.) and widely used influencer marketing apps such as Modash, which include a detailed profile of influencer audiences and their location as part of their services (Modash, n.d.). Creators therefore face a strategic dilemma about whether to pursue broader, potentially viral global audiences at the risk of undermining brand partnerships, or to prioritize smaller, anchored communities that offer greater commercial stability.

These geolocated audience and brand benchmarks need to be evidenced through metrics provided by platforms and expands the impact metrics have on the commercial conditions of influencer work (Arriagada & Valderrama, 2025). As O'Meara (2026) shows, metrics are not neutral measurements but instruments through which advertisers and agencies structure negotiations, justify payment decisions, and determine hireability. Claudio articulated this trade-off as follows:

“But, for example, if I wanted to go viral and grow a lot, I could do so by targeting Argentina, but I'm not going to do that. That makes you grow very quickly. [...] And then I'll tell you that at the brand level, it causes a lot of problems.” (Claudio, 26. Food influencer, Spain)

Claudio's reluctance to grow through Argentine audiences is thus not only a judgment about platform distribution but an anticipation of how his brand partners will assess it. The imaginaries we describe in our paper are shaped in dialogue with these criteria as much as with platform architectures, which suggests that resisting virality involves resisting a metric-driven logic of evaluation originating outside the platform itself.

To make sense of creators' rejection of certain forms of geolocated visibility, we need to attend to the linguistic and cultural dimensions of visibility strategies, which are closely shaped by local markets. As Arriagada and Bishop (2021) show, creators navigate persistent tensions between commercial viability and perceived authenticity. These tensions are further structured by platform advertising regimes that reproduce regional inequalities. For example, cost-per-mille (CPM) rates—the amount advertisers pay per 1,000 views—vary significantly across regions: views from the United States are typically treated as high-value audiences, yielding rates of up to USD 40 per 1,000 views, whereas views from regions such as the Philippines may generate as little as USD 2 per 1,000 views (Mears & Beauvais, 2025).

In response, creators often tailor their content to linguistically and culturally specific publics. Interviewees described producing content in minority languages or accents, such as Swiss German or Canary dialect in Spain, to cultivate niche audiences with higher commercial value or those who were desirable for their growth plan.

“One of the issues was that if you were doing your content in English, then Swiss companies wouldn't want to collaborate with you.” (Rebecca, Travel and Food influencer, Switzerland)

“The accent thing is very important, because, also, the idiosyncrasy depends on which Autonomous Community you're referring to. Specifically in the Canary Islands. There's a lot of power in identity and culture.” (Mariana, Fashion and Lifestyle influencer, Spain)

In the Swiss context, this strategy can be particularly effective given the country's strong consumer market. However, such approaches are likely to operate differently in smaller or less affluent markets, or in contexts across the Global South, where linguistic targeting does not necessarily translate into comparable economic returns.

Conclusions: Conceptualizing imaginaries of (anti)virality

Virality has been treated as an implicit marker of value since the earliest research on participatory media, with widespread circulation and audience reach positioned as central outcomes of online cultural production (Burgess & Green, 2018; Abidin, 2018). Such circulation has typically been modeled as contagion or diffusion (Guadagno et al., 2013; Popa-Wyatt, 2023). Approaching virality phenomenologically reveals what amplification means to individual creators. Our interviews complicate the assumption that this meaning is straightforward or always positive. Creators reject some aspects of virality and certain types of amplification, and this rejection creates some tensions and ambiguities. While the protective management of visibility has been documented among creators facing harassment and moderation (cf. Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Stegeman et al., 2024), we find similar orientations among creators for whom these pressures are not the defining condition of their work.

We conceptualize these orientations as imaginaries of (anti)virality: the shared, experience-based understandings through which creators anticipate and evaluate viral amplification as something to be limited, redirected, or resisted. (Anti)virality imaginaries are formed through repeated encounters with spikes in amplification and held in advance of the next viral instance. We identify three such imaginaries. The aleatory imaginary concerns the lack of control creators have in selecting and replicating the moment of amplification. The detached imaginary concerns amplification that separates the creator—including their coherent online persona, values and goals—from viral content and the publics and market pressures it attracts. The diffuse imaginary extends this, locating the source of that detachment in platform architectures that push content beyond the boundaries within which creators have built their position and beyond their desired territorial and linguistic targets. Whereas the aleatory imaginary concerns the difficulty of producing amplification, the detached and diffuse imaginaries concern what happens once it occurs.

Considering these imaginaries together, we first argue that resistance to virality emerges from creators' experiences with the moments (when) and modes (how) virality happens and as a result, this resistance can be partial to some types and elements of virality. In this space, visibility reflects the cultivation of a curated audience, a strategic relationship with local brands, a recognizable, cohesive goal for content creation aligned with the creator. Conversely, virality is a spike measured against habitual metrics, and it can disturb the process of constructing a sustainable content creation career. Each imaginary illustrates creators' preferred moments and modes to be seen, and this is clearest when participants speak about virality's aftermath: the followers gained and then lost, the audiences drawn in by one atypical video and disinterested in the creator's usual work, the views arriving from markets or platforms with no commercial value. Each case endangers the audience relationship a creator has spent years building and what they feel their audience can bring. This helps us explain why creators working under contract in content farms, with disposable personas and income tied directly to volume, experience virality as pleasurable and even addictive (Mears & Beauvais, 2025), while our participants experience it as destabilizing.

A second implication of (anti)virality imaginaries concerns how visibility-related value is measured by creators and the external actors that determine creator value. Our participants consistently distinguished the quantity of attention from its composition and reflected on how they derive value from their social media activities, often illustrated in their rejection of the recipients of viral output (types of audiences) or the return they got from becoming viral (monetization, improved conditions). Existing scholarship recognizes that visibility has an addressee, whether the employers, clients, and followers among whom creators work to become "noticeable and positively prominent" (Abidin, 2016, p. 90), or the "quality over quantity" that Cotter's (2019, p. 906) relational influencers favor over follower counts. Our results highlight how creators decide which audiences are worth having in the first place. Our participants make that decision as they interact with other actors who have a role in defining the requirements for success. Our results expand on the role that agencies and brands play in creators' preferred audience composition and influencer valuation (Arriagada & Valderrama, 2025), and creators' ambivalence in considering platform metrics as indicators of their worth (O'Meara, 2026).

A third implication of (anti)virality imaginaries concerns the limits of creator agency. Existing accounts of visibility management, including grey visibility (Abidin, 2022), the visibility bind (Duffy, 2023), or strategic invisibility (Stegeman et al., 2024), assume that creators can turn exposure up or down. This is further illustrated by empirical work with specific groups: immigrant creators strategize to be selectively visible and avoid moderation (Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2022), creators in war zones adopt platform-native formats (Heřmanová et al., 2025), and marginalized creators restrict who can reach them (Glatt, 2023). Across these theoretical and empirical works, creators are generally unable to control the conditions of their work, but their agency lies in the possibility of altering the types and locations of their interactions and content. Virality operates differently: it cannot be produced on demand or steered once it happens, and there is no dependable relationship between what a creator posts and whether amplification follows. What creators develop instead is an anticipatory orientation, and this is what an imaginary provides. Agency is relocated to the period before amplification occurs, extending Nagy and Neff's (2015) argument that users act on expectations of what technologies should do, to an outcome that may never materialize and that creators frequently do not seek.

Our paper advances creator scholarship by establishing (anti)virality as an object of study and an orientation towards content creation that creators actively hold and act on in advance. Our research design can only partly answer how far this orientation extends. The study draws on interviews with creators in two European contexts and focuses on Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, which bounds the findings by geography, platform ecosystem, and regulatory environment. Our (anti)virality imaginaries proposal is examined among creators whose positions are relatively secure, which expands on research related to traditionally marginalized groups to examine how (anti)viral orientations also arise without the risks that have explained them elsewhere. Because we study anticipation and interpretation rather than amplification as it happens, we cannot speak to how imaginaries hold up in the moment a spike arrives, or how far accounts given afterwards are shaped by knowing the outcome. Future research could address these through longitudinal designs combining interviews with platform trace data, or across platform infrastructures with different content distribution or monetization structures.

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