

Original Article

## Digital Success vs. Traditional Employment: Comparing Female Instagram Creators and Salaried Workers in India

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** To compare the economic and psychological differences between female social media creators earning through digital platforms and traditionally employed salaried women in India.

**Material and Methods:** A mixed-methods study was conducted using 150 public Instagram profiles of female creators, coded for thematic content. Secondary labor market data for salaried Indian women were used for economic comparison. Quantitative analysis included frequency counts and a chi-square test assessing engagement and body-focused content.

**Results:** Creators predominantly displayed financial independence narratives (84%), anti-9–5 messaging (68%), luxury lifestyle content (76%), body-focused posts (82%), monetization mentions (34%), and empowerment framing (71%). Higher engagement was significantly associated with body-focused content ( $\chi^2(1, N=150)=12.4, p<.001$ ). Estimated creator earnings (₹40,000–70,000/month) were 3–5 times higher than average salaried women (₹13,666/month), though income was unstable and required continuous visibility work. Such contrasts may contribute to social comparison, body-image concerns, and psychological stress among salaried women.

**Conclusion:** Digital creators may earn more than traditionally employed women but face income instability driven by visibility and appearance-based engagement. These dynamics foster unrealistic comparisons and potential psychological strain, underscoring the need for ethical digital labor guidelines and mental-health-informed employment policies.

**Keywords:** Digital labor, Female employment, Income inequality, Instagram creators, Social comparison

### INTRODUCTION

The digital economy has transformed how women earn income in India. Platforms like Instagram now allow people to generate substantial revenue through subscriptions, brand partnerships, and sponsored content. In many cases, these earnings exceed what college-educated women make in traditional office jobs.<sup>[1,2]</sup> This economic reality has created a visible divide between digitally successful creators and regularly employed women. Recent data shows that salaried women in India earn an average monthly salary of approximately ₹13,666.<sup>[3,4]</sup> In contrast, successful social media creators with substantial followings can earn ₹40,000 to ₹70,000 or more per month through multiple revenue streams.<sup>[1,2]</sup> This income disparity is particularly striking given that many creators do not hold traditional degrees or corporate positions. Instead, they monetize their personal brand, physical appearance, and lifestyle content.<sup>[5]</sup> This situation raises

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important questions about changing work values. Traditional employment rewards educational qualifications, years of experience, and formal credentials. Digital creator work rewards visibility, engagement, physical appearance, and personal branding.<sup>[6,7]</sup> This shift has created tension between formal education pathways and digital influence strategies.

Research shows that social comparison affects how people evaluate themselves and their life circumstances. Festinger<sup>[8]</sup> explained that people judge themselves by comparing themselves to others. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and dissatisfaction when they constantly compare themselves to people who appear more successful. On social media, these comparisons become more intense because of carefully edited images showing success, attractive bodies, and financial freedom.<sup>[9,10]</sup> Content focused on physical appearance has been specifically linked to body dissatisfaction and mental health problems among women who regularly view influencer lifestyles.<sup>[11,12]</sup> For traditionally employed women earning modest salaries, exposure to creator content showcasing luxury lifestyles and high earnings may trigger psychological stress and job dissatisfaction. Digital labor theory explains online content creation as work where visibility and engagement translate into economic value.<sup>[6,7]</sup> Female creators use body images, luxury lifestyle photos, and empowerment messages to attract followers and monetize their presence. They essentially commodify their appearance and personal brand.<sup>[1,2]</sup> This visibility-based work fundamentally differs from traditional

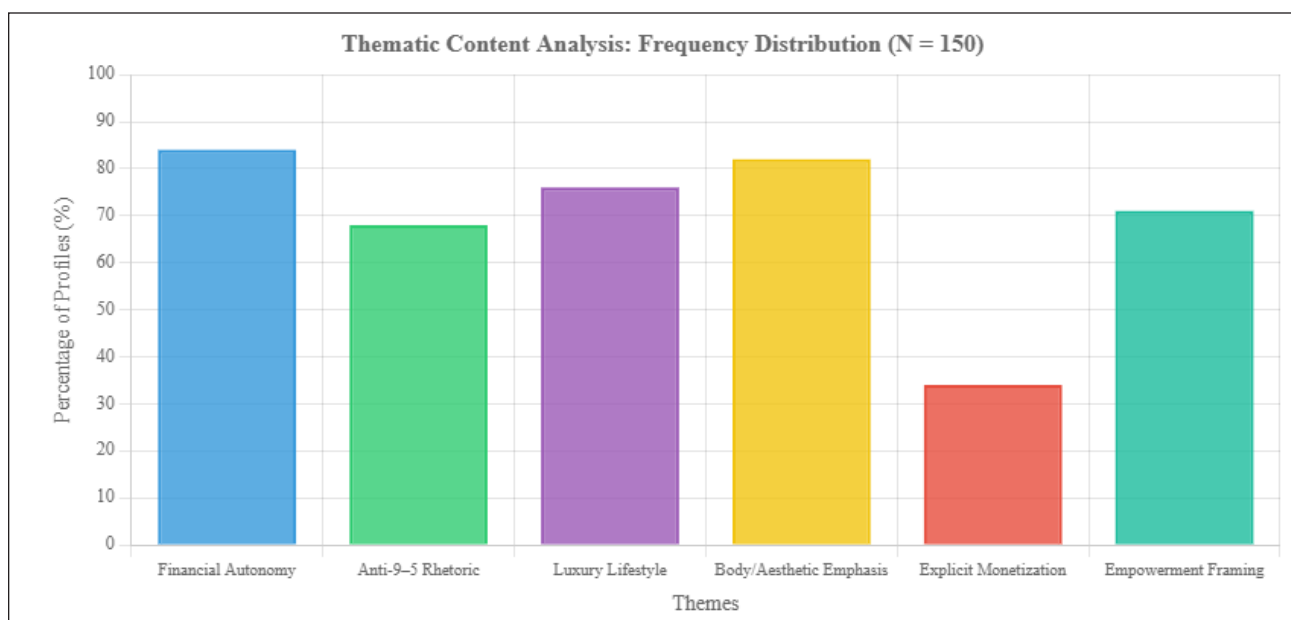
employment that rewards time spent working, completed tasks, and educational credentials.

Recent studies in India show that exposure to creator content can increase stress for working women. This may cause anxiety, job dissatisfaction, and negative self-evaluation.<sup>[13,14]</sup> While much research focuses on Western countries, there is limited evidence examining South Asian digital spaces where cultural norms and gender expectations intersect with platform economies.<sup>[15]</sup> This study fills this gap by analyzing 150 public Instagram profiles of Indian female creators alongside secondary data on salaried women's earnings and employment conditions. We explore: (1) what content themes digital creators emphasize, (2) how creator earnings compare to traditional salaries, (3) how body-focused content relates to engagement metrics, and (4) potential psychological implications for working women who view this content [Figure 1].

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

### Study design

We used a mixed-methods approach combining analysis of public Instagram profiles with secondary labor market data on Indian working women. The goal was to understand how female creators present themselves economically and visually, estimate their earning potential, and compare this with traditional employment outcomes. We then examined potential psychological effects on salaried women who view creator



**Figure 1.** Frequency distribution of six primary themes identified in Instagram creator content analysis. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Body/aesthetic emphasis (82%) and financial autonomy narratives (84%) were most prevalent, while explicit monetization mentions (34%) were least common. Note: Percentages represent proportion of profiles (N = 150) displaying each theme based on analysis of bio and 30 most recent posts. Two independent coders achieved substantial inter-rater reliability (Cohen's  $\kappa = 0.76$ ).

content. We only used public data with no direct participant contact, following ethical guidelines for internet research.<sup>[16,17]</sup>

### Sample selection: Creator profiles

We selected 150 female Instagram profiles from India. All creators were between the ages of 18 and 35. We started with an initial pool of 500 accounts found using hashtags like #subscriptioncreator, #influencerindia, and #digitalcreator.

To be included in the study, accounts needed to meet four criteria:

- At least 10,000 followers
- Visible subscription or monetization options (paid content, brand partnerships, affiliate links)
- Public account status (not private accounts)
- Active posting within the last 30 days

Public status means the profile was set to public, allowing anyone to view content without prior approval. Creator age was determined through bio information, captions mentioning age or graduation years, and visual assessment when other information was unavailable. Profiles where age could not be reliably determined were excluded.

From the qualifying accounts, we randomly selected 150 profiles for detailed analysis. This sample size was chosen based on similar studies in digital labor research and provided sufficient statistical power for chi-square analysis.<sup>[18]</sup>

### Secondary data: Traditional employment

Secondary data on Indian working women were gathered from multiple authoritative sources to enable a reliable economic comparison. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2021–22, the Government of India's primary national employment survey, provided official wage and salary estimates for female workers. Additional employment and income trends were obtained from the Center for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) 2023, a leading private economic research database. Broader structural insights on women's labour conditions were drawn from the State of Working India Report 2023, an academic publication offering detailed analyzes of workforce patterns. Further, gender pay statistics from governmental and research reports were used to understand disparities in female versus male earnings. Together, these sources offered a comprehensive dataset for comparing the economic circumstances of female digital creators with those of salaried working women in India.

This data provided information on: *Working India Report*

- Average monthly salaries for salaried women
- Employment rates and labor force participation

- Job satisfaction and workplace conditions
- Educational qualifications and earnings relationship

### Data collection: Creator metrics

For each creator profile, we extracted detailed platform metrics including follower count, engagement rate, posting frequency, and account age in months. We also documented the creator's primary content type, visible monetization strategies such as brand partnerships, affiliate links, or subscription-based offerings, and coded thematic patterns across the most recent 30 posts. Engagement rate was calculated using the standard formula:  $(\text{total likes} + \text{comments} \div \text{followers}) \times 100$ , averaged across the latest 30 posts to ensure consistency.

### Estimating creator earnings

While exact creator earnings are not publicly available, we estimated income ranges based on:

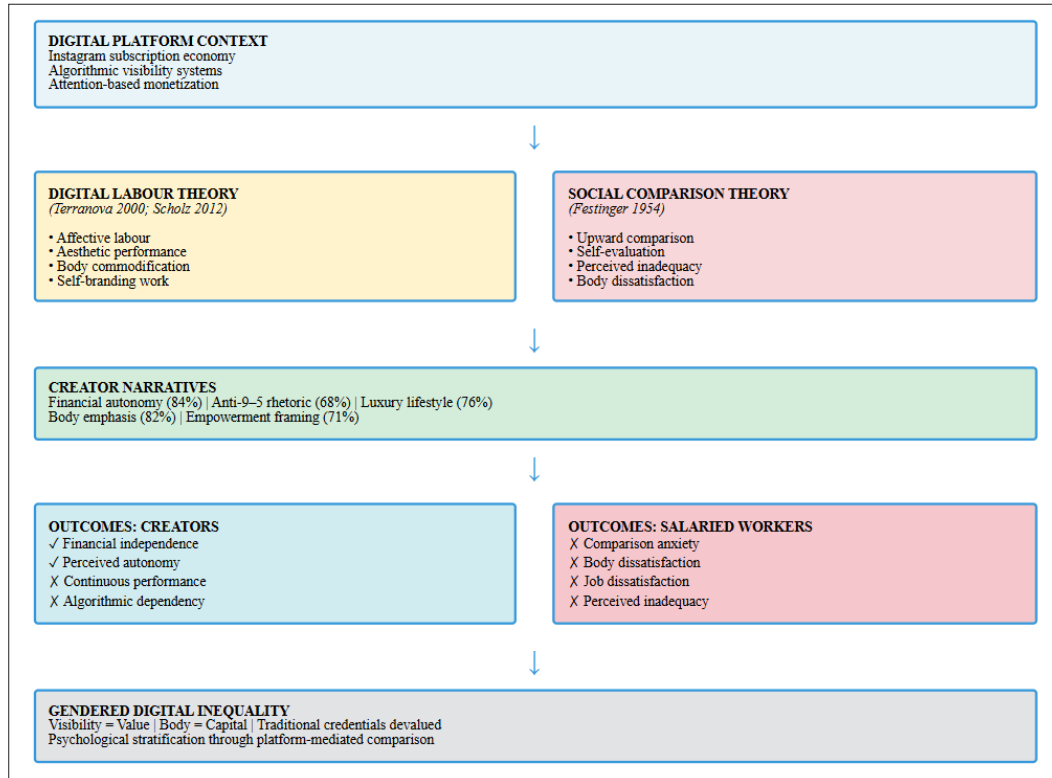
1. Industry benchmarks for Instagram monetization.<sup>[1,2]</sup>
2. Follower count and engagement rates (higher engagement commands higher sponsorship rates)
3. Visible monetization methods (multiple streams indicate higher earnings)
4. Content type (fashion and beauty typically earn more than other categories)

Conservative estimates indicate that female creators with over 100,000 followers and strong engagement can generate substantial income through multiple revenue streams. Brand partnerships typically yield ₹10,000–30,000 per sponsored post, while affiliate marketing contributes approximately ₹5,000–15,000 per month. Subscription-based earnings range from ₹5,000–25,000 monthly, assuming 100–500 paying subscribers at rates of ₹50–100 per month. Additionally, creators who sell their own products may earn variable supplementary income depending on sales volume. These figures represent conservative projections derived from industry reports and creator disclosures documented in previous studies.

### Content analysis: Themes

We analyzed content for six main themes [Figure 2] identified in previous digital labor research:

1. **Financial independence narrative:** Posts or bio text explicitly referencing income generation, entrepreneurship, or economic autonomy. Examples: "built my own brand," "financial freedom through passion."
2. **Anti-9-5 rhetoric:** Content rejecting corporate employment or celebrating independence from traditional work. Examples: "escaped the cubicle life," "no more office politics."



**Figure 2.** Conceptual framework illustrating the intersection of digital labor theory and social comparison theory in understanding female subscription-based social media work. The model shows how platform structures incentivize aesthetic performance, creating divergent outcomes for digital creators versus traditionally employed women exposed to their content.

3. **Luxury lifestyle display:** Visual displays of wealth through high-end fashion, travel, fine dining, or luxury goods.
4. **Body and appearance emphasis:** Posts highlighting physical appearance, fitness achievements, beauty routines, outfit displays, or aesthetic presentation.
5. **Explicit monetization mentions:** Direct promotion of paid subscriptions, brand links, affiliate programs, or financial support requests.
6. **Empowerment framing:** Language or imagery linking creator success to empowerment, self-confidence, independence, or personal fulfillment.

These themes were drawn from prior research.<sup>[1,2]</sup> We created a detailed coding guide for each theme.

### Coding procedure and reliability

Two researchers independently coded 30 randomly selected profiles (20% of the sample) to check inter-rater reliability. For each theme, coders marked whether it was present or absent, considering both the bio text and the most recent 30 posts.

Cohen's kappa averaged  $\kappa = 0.76$ , indicating strong agreement.<sup>[19]</sup>

Individual theme kappas ranged from 0.68 to 0.85. After discussing disagreements to consensus, one coder completed the remaining 120 profiles using refined coding rules.

### Categorization approach

Many creators post across multiple themes. For the six themes, we coded each independently as present or absent. This means a single profile could have multiple themes. Percentages reflect the proportion of profiles featuring each theme.

For content type (fashion, fitness, travel, entrepreneurship), we categorized by primary focus—whichever type represented more than 50% of posts, or the most prominent theme based on bio and pinned content.

### Statistical analysis

We calculated descriptive statistics for engagement rates, follower counts, theme frequencies, and monetization methods. We used chi-square tests to examine whether body-focused content was associated with higher engagement. We divided the sample into high-engagement (top 50 profiles) and lower-engagement (remaining 100 profiles) groups.

## Theoretical framework

Our analysis was guided by two theories. Digital labor theory explains how platform visibility converts into economic value.<sup>[6,7]</sup> Social Comparison Theory describes how people evaluate themselves relative to others, especially when comparing upward to those perceived as more successful.<sup>[8]</sup> Together, these theories explain how platform structures encourage certain content strategies while potentially creating psychological stress for traditional workers viewing this content.

## RESULTS

### Economic comparison: Creators vs. Salaried women

Table 1 presents the economic comparison between female creators and traditionally employed women. The comparison reveals a significant income gap. While salaried women earn an average of ₹ 13,666 monthly, successful creators can earn 3-5 times this amount. However, creator income is highly unstable and comes without employment benefits.

Metric	Female Creators (N=150)	Salaried Women (National Data)
Average monthly income	₹ 45,000-50,000 (estimated)	₹ 13,666
Income range	₹ 15,000-1,50,000+	₹ 8,000-25,000 (majority)
Income stability	Highly variable, no guarantees	Stable, fixed monthly salary
Top earners (Top 25%)	₹ 70,000-1,50,000+ monthly	₹ 20,000-25,000 monthly
Benefits & Security	None (no PF, insurance, leave)	PF, insurance, paid leave
Work hours	Variable, often 50-70 hrs/week	Fixed 40-50 hrs/week
Educational requirement	No formal requirement	Often requires degree
Income-to-effort ratio	Potentially high but unstable	Lower but predictable

**Note.** Creator income estimated based on follower counts, engagement rates, and visible monetization methods using industry benchmarks. Salaried women data from CMIE (2023) and State of Working India Report (2023)

### Creator sample characteristics

Table 2 shows descriptive characteristics of the 150 creator profiles analyzed.

Variable	Mean (SD) / %	Range / Notes
Follower count (× 1000)	128.4 (92.6)	10.2 – 460.0
Engagement rate (%)	5.1 (2.2)	1.4 – 11.3
<b>Primary content focus</b>		
Fashion & beauty	44%	(n = 66)
Fitness & wellness	27%	(n = 41)
Travel & luxury	18%	(n = 27)
Entrepreneurship & skills	11%	(n = 16)
Profiles with explicit monetization links	61%	(n = 91)
Subscription or paid content visible	46%	(n = 69)
Posts coded as empowerment-themed	33%	(n = 50)
Verified badge present	22%	(n = 33)
Estimated creator age (years)	24.7 (3.9)	18 – 35
<b>Region (self-stated)</b>		
Metropolitan cities	58%	(n = 87)
Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities	42%	(n = 63)

SD: Standard deviation

*Note.* Statistics derived from publicly available Instagram metrics accessed January 2025. Engagement rates are calculated as (total likes + comments per post) / followers × 100.

Fashion and beauty content dominated (44%), followed by fitness and wellness (27%). This indicates the prominence of appearance-focused material. Notably, 61% of profiles displayed explicit monetization links, and 46% had visible paid content options, demonstrating the commercial nature of these accounts.

### Thematic content analysis

Table 3 shows the frequency of content themes across all profiles.

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Financial independence narrative	126	84%
Body and appearance emphasis	123	82%
Luxury lifestyle display	114	76%
Empowerment framing	107	71%
Anti-9-5 rhetoric	102	68%
Explicit monetization mentions	51	34%

*Note.* Themes are not mutually exclusive. Individual profiles often featured multiple themes simultaneously.

### Financial independence narrative (84%, n = 126)

The majority of creators emphasized their financial independence and earning potential. Posts frequently included captions about "being your own boss" or "earning from home."

Many creators showcased income-related achievements, often contrasting their earnings with traditional salaries.

### Body and appearance emphasis (82%, n = 123)

Strong focus on physical appearance dominated creator content. Posts featured outfit displays, fitness achievements, fashion modeling, and beauty tutorials. Creators shared carefully curated content highlighting physical attractiveness, workout routines, and body transformations.

### Luxury lifestyle display (76%, n = 114)

Many profiles showcased luxury experiences and high-end purchases, including exotic travel, fine dining, designer clothing, and premium lifestyle elements. These displays served as aspirational content, suggesting that the creator lifestyle enables access to luxury goods unaffordable on traditional salaries.

### Empowerment framing (71%, n = 107)

Creators frequently used empowerment language, framing their work as liberating, confidence-building, and personally fulfilling. Common phrases included "living my best life," "taking control of my future," and messages about self-confidence and independence.

### Anti-9-5 rhetoric (68%, n = 102)

A significant portion of profiles explicitly criticized traditional employment. Content included statements about "escaping the 9-5," "freedom from office politics," or direct comparisons highlighting limitations of conventional jobs. This rhetoric positioned creator work as superior to traditional employment.

### Explicit monetization mentions (34%, n = 51)

Some creators directly mentioned monetization methods, subscription options, or encouraged followers to "support" them through paid content. This was less common, suggesting many creators prefer indirect financial messaging.

These themes often overlapped within profiles. The high prevalence of financial independence and body emphasis themes (both over 80%) shows these are core pillars of the Instagram creator economy.<sup>[1,2]</sup>

### Body content and engagement

We examined whether body-focused content was associated with higher engagement rates. Among the 50 highest-engagement profiles, 68% (n = 34) featured prominent body-focused content. Among the remaining 100 profiles, only 41% (n = 41) featured such content.

A chi-square test showed this difference was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 150) = 12.4, p < .001$ , with moderate effect size (Cramér's  $V = 0.29$ ). This demonstrates a clear

association between body-centric content and audience interaction, indicating appearance-based performance drives engagement and therefore earning potential.<sup>[11,20]</sup>

### Platform and monetization strategies

Table 4 shows monetization methods used by creators. Brand partnerships (85%) and affiliate marketing (59%) were most common. Many creators combined these with subscriptions (34%), product sales (23%), and external platforms (15%). The mean of 2.8 revenue streams per creator shows the hybrid nature of digital entrepreneurship (Scholz, 2012). The mean of 5.2 posts per week suggests that consistent content production is essential for maintaining algorithmic visibility and audience engagement. The median account age of 36 months indicates that successful creators maintain visibility over multiple years.

**Table 4:** Monetization strategies among female creators (N = 150)

Monetization Method	Percentage	n
Brand partnerships & sponsored posts	85%	128
Affiliate marketing	59%	89
Paid subscriptions / exclusive content	34%	51
Product sales (own brand/merchandise)	23%	35
External platforms (Patreon, OnlyFans, etc.)	15%	23
Mean number of revenue streams per creator	2.8	-
Posts per week (mean)	5.2 (SD=2.3)	-
Account age in months (median)	36	-

SD: Standard deviation

*Note.* Monetization methods are not mutually exclusive. Most creators use multiple revenue streams simultaneously.

### Inter-rater reliability

Table 5 reports inter-rater reliability for the six themes across 30 profiles. These reliability coefficients confirm that the coding scheme was applied consistently and the observations are methodologically sound.

**Table 5:** Inter-rater reliability for content themes (n = 30)

Theme	Cohen's kappa	Agreement level
Financial independence	0.82	Almost perfect
Body/appearance emphasis	0.74	Substantial
Luxury lifestyle display	0.85	Almost perfect
Empowerment framing	0.71	Substantial
Anti-9-5 rhetoric	0.68	Substantial
Explicit monetization	0.78	Substantial
<b>Mean</b>	<b>0.76</b>	<b>Substantial</b>

*Note.* Agreement levels follow Landis & Koch<sup>19</sup>: 0.61–0.80 = substantial, 0.81–1.00 = almost perfect.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined economic and content differences between female Instagram creators and traditionally employed women in India. The findings reveal substantial income disparities alongside fundamentally different work paradigms.

### Economic disparity and labor value transformation

The most striking finding is the income gap. While salaried women earn an average of ₹ 13,666 monthly, successful creators can earn ₹ 40,000-70,000 or more. This represents a 3-5x income difference favoring creators. This economic reality challenges traditional assumptions about education and employment as pathways to financial success.

Traditional employment rewards educational credentials, years of experience, and formal qualifications. The creator economy rewards visibility, engagement, physical presentation, and personal branding.<sup>[6,7]</sup> This transformation in how labor value is assessed has profound implications.

Many creators do not hold advanced degrees or corporate positions. Yet they out-earn college-educated women in traditional jobs. This creates a paradox for young women investing in education while seeing peers without degrees earn substantially more through digital platforms.

However, creator income is highly unstable. It comes without employment benefits like a provident fund, health insurance, or paid leave. Creators depend on platform algorithms, audience preferences, brand relationships, and market trends, all of which can shift suddenly.<sup>[21]</sup> The multiple revenue streams shown in Table 4 (mean 2.8 per creator) suggest underlying economic precocity requiring constant diversification.

### Content strategies and body commodification

Financial independence narratives (84%) and body/appearance emphasis (82%) dominated creator content. This shows that digital platforms reward entrepreneurial initiative and physical self-presentation.<sup>[1,2]</sup>

The significant correlation between body-focused content and engagement is particularly important. Among high-engagement profiles, 68% featured body content compared to 41% of lower-engagement profiles ( $p < .001$ ). Since engagement directly drives monetization through sponsorships and algorithmic visibility, this finding shows that appearance-based work is economically rational for creators.

This reflects platform-driven digital labor where the body becomes a form of capital. Female creators strategically commodify their physical appearance to maximize income.

The dominance of fashion and beauty (44%) and fitness and wellness (27%) content confirms that physical appearance remains highly valued in visibility work.

Instagram's algorithm prioritizes high-engagement content, creating a feedback loop that rewards visually striking posts.<sup>[22,23]</sup> While the algorithm doesn't explicitly favor body content, such posts tend to generate strong engagement, leading to greater visibility and higher earning potential.

### Anti-9-5 rhetoric and cultural shift

The anti-9-to-5 language found in 68% of profiles reflects a cultural shift in attitudes toward traditional work, especially among younger people.<sup>[24]</sup> While some of this is marketing strategy, it also reflects genuine frustrations with conventional workplaces' limited wages, inflexible schedules, restricted autonomy, and slow salary growth.<sup>[25]</sup>

For creators, this rhetoric serves multiple purposes. It positions their work as liberating and superior. It attracts audiences frustrated with their own jobs. It justifies the intensive labor required for content creation by framing it as freedom rather than work.

However, this framing obscures the reality that creator work has its own demands. Creators face constant pressure to post, respond to comments, maintain appearance, stay trendy, and manage multiple revenue relationships. The mean of 5.2 posts per week suggests continuous content production is essential, effectively creating a seven-day work week.

### Psychological implications for salaried women

For traditionally employed women observing creator success, the comparison may be particularly difficult. They see peers earning 3-5 times more while showcasing luxury lifestyles and flexible schedules. This triggers upward social comparison, comparing oneself to others perceived as more successful.<sup>[8]</sup>

Research shows such comparisons can lead to feelings of inadequacy, job dissatisfaction, body-related anxiety, and reduced self-esteem.<sup>[10,11]</sup> The carefully curated nature of creator content intensifies these effects. Viewers see highlight reels of success, not the unstable income, constant labor, or psychological costs of maintaining public visibility.

The strong emphasis on body and appearance (82% of profiles) may particularly affect body image and self-perception among working women. When financial success becomes visibly associated with physical attractiveness, women in traditional jobs may experience body dissatisfaction alongside economic frustration.<sup>[12]</sup>

This creates a psychological bind. Traditional employment offers a stable income but limited growth and earning

caps. Creator work offers potentially unlimited earnings but considerable risk, no guaranteed income, and requires constant self-exposure. Both paths have significant drawbacks, potentially contributing to widespread job dissatisfaction among young working women.<sup>[3,13]</sup>

### Gender and cultural context in India

The intersection with Indian gender norms deserves attention. Traditional expectations of female modesty exist alongside influencer culture's self-promotional demands.<sup>[14,15]</sup> Creators navigate these tensions through various strategies.

The empowerment narratives found in 71% of profiles may help reconcile visibility work with culturally acceptable forms of female agency.<sup>[26]</sup> By framing appearance-based work as empowering and liberating, creators make it culturally palatable in contexts where overt self-promotion might otherwise be criticized.

The emphasis on financial independence (84%) may resonate particularly strongly in India, where women's economic independence remains limited and culturally contested.<sup>[27]</sup> Creator work offers a path to financial autonomy that doesn't require directly challenging family structures or workplace hierarchies. However, it may come at the cost of constant self-presentation and body-focused labor.

The diversity in creator locations (42% from Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities) suggests digital platforms have democratized access to creator opportunities beyond major metros. This is significant in a country where geographical location often determines economic opportunities.

### Practical implications

**For policymakers:** Results suggest a need for digital labor regulations addressing the unique challenges of platform work, including income instability, lack of benefits, and psychological demands.<sup>[28]</sup> Traditional labor protections don't easily translate to the creator economy, requiring innovative approaches.<sup>[29]</sup>

**For platform companies:** Findings highlight ethical responsibilities regarding algorithm design. If algorithms disproportionately reward body content, platforms may inadvertently encourage strategies that contribute to body dissatisfaction among viewers.<sup>[23]</sup> Platforms should consider how recommendation systems affect both creators and audiences.

**For educational institutions:** The income disparity challenges the value proposition of formal education. Institutions should consider how to prepare students for both traditional and digital economy pathways, while helping them critically evaluate creator success narratives.

**For mental health professionals:** The study underscores the importance of media literacy education helping women critically engage with creator content, recognize social comparison processes, and develop resilience.<sup>[11,30]</sup>

**For creators:** Findings suggest the importance of sustainable content strategies balancing economic necessity with psychological well-being and personal values.<sup>[31-33]</sup>

Creators should consider long-term sustainability beyond appearance-focused content.<sup>[34-37]</sup>

**For traditionally employed women:** Understanding that creator content is carefully curated and often obscures economic instability may help mitigate negative comparison effects. Recognizing the hidden labor and risks behind apparent success is important for psychological well-being.

### Limitations

First, creator income was estimated based on industry benchmarks rather than verified earnings. Exact income data is not publicly available. Our estimates are conservative but may not reflect actual earnings for specific individuals.

Second, we analyzed secondary data on salaried women rather than collecting primary data. This provided an economic comparison but not direct insights into how individual women experience or respond to creator content.

Third, the cross-sectional design captures a snapshot at one point in time. This limits causal conclusions. We cannot determine whether body-focused content causes high engagement or whether successful creators simply choose this content type.

Fourth, the sample is India-specific and restricted to female Instagram users aged 18-35. This limits generalization to other countries, age groups, genders, or platforms. Different cultural contexts may show different patterns.

Fifth, the study does not account for individual differences in vulnerability to social comparison effects. Some women may be more susceptible based on personality, self-esteem, or other factors.

### Future research directions

Future research should collect primary data from both creators and traditionally employed women. This would include:

- Creator interviews about actual earnings, expenses, and lived experiences
- Surveys of working women about social comparison experiences and responses
- Experimental designs testing causal relationships between content exposure and psychological outcomes

Longitudinal studies could track creators and audiences over time to examine how content strategies and psychological effects evolve. Cross-cultural comparisons would reveal whether these patterns are specific to India or exist across different contexts.

Intervention research could test the effectiveness of media literacy programs or platform design modifications in reducing negative comparison effects. Economic studies could examine the long-term financial sustainability of creator work compared to traditional employment, including considerations of savings, retirement, and career longevity.

Despite these limitations, this study provides a systematic examination of the economic and psychological dynamics between digital creators and traditionally employed women in India. It offers valuable insights for scholars, policymakers, educators, and women navigating these evolving economic landscapes.

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals a growing economic and psychological divide between female Instagram creators and traditionally employed women in India. Successful creators can earn 3-5 times more than average salaried women by strategically using appearance-based performance, entrepreneurial narratives, and platform visibility. However, this income comes with substantial instability, no employment benefits, and constant pressure for self-exposure.

For traditionally employed women, this economic reality creates challenging social comparisons. They see peers earning significantly more without formal qualifications or corporate positions. The carefully curated images of financial success and luxury lifestyles may trigger feelings of inadequacy, body dissatisfaction, and job-related frustration.

The findings show that digital platforms are transforming how labor value is assessed. There is a visible shift from formal qualifications and stable employment toward visibility, self-presentation, and entrepreneurial creativity (Scholz, 2012; Terranova, 2000). Educational credentials and years of service increasingly matter less than follower counts and engagement rates.

This transformation raises important questions about employment, education, and social equity. If digital visibility consistently outlearns formal education, what does this mean for young women deciding whether to invest in college degrees? How do we value labor that produces economic output without traditional employment structures? What are the mental health costs of constant social comparison to curated success narratives?

The combination of digital labor theory and Social

Comparison Theory provides a useful framework for understanding these dynamics. Platform structures encourage certain behaviors (appearance-focused content, financial narratives) while potentially producing psychological effects on broader audiences (inadequacy, body dissatisfaction, job frustration).

This research emphasizes the importance of considering both economic and psychological dimensions when analyzing digital work. Visibility and body-centric performance have become central to success in social media economies, but the broader social and mental health implications require urgent attention.

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