

Understanding the creativity constraints in content creation for social media

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Abstract

The creative process is important to create novel, useful and well-crafted social media content. Previous research showed various factors constrain such creative processes. Despite the popularity of social media and the importance of creativity in social media content, it remains unclear how creativity is constrained in this context. Therefore, this study explores the constraints and their effects on creativity through a dual-method approach combining cultural probes and semi-structured interviews. Eight key creativity constraints were found specific for social media content creation and categorized into three types: input (time, tools, budget), process (company influence, mental state), and output (standards, privacy issues, algorithms). Furthermore, the research also suggests potential solutions, such as establishing a clear brand strategy and improving the mental state of marketers, to mitigate these constraints. Thereby, this study provides valuable insights for marketers to better navigate creativity constraints and enhance their content creation process for social media.

Keywords: creativity constraints, content marketing, social media marketing, creative process

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Introduction

Social media have become an indispensable element of people's daily lives. Of the Dutch citizens above fifteen years old, 97% use social media spending almost two hours each day (Jonker et al., 2024). Social media is used as a tool for consumers to share information through immediate connectivity. This ease of access via social media makes consumers and companies closer connected to each other (Erragcha & Romdhane, 2014). Therefore, social media is a crucial tool for companies to establish valuable contact with actual and potential customers (Oliveros-Coello & Guzmán-Sala, 2022). This easy access to information via social media has led to a more critical consumer (Ho et al., 2020; Oliveros-Coello & Guzmán-Sala, 2022). Consumers choose with what content they want to interact. As a result, the impact of traditional advertising is waning, as online paid advertisements face increasing scepticism from these critical consumers (Kaspar et al., 2019). Consequently, the importance of content marketing increased (Oliveros-Coello & Guzmán-Sala, 2022). Content marketing is a marketing process of content creation by crafting and sharing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and acquire a well-defined audience (Peelen et al., 2019). In this context, brands compete for consumers' attention by sharing relevant content via owned social media channels instead of paid advertisements (Ho et al., 2020). Content marketing allows companies to establish long-term relationships and build a dialogue with potential customers, eventually encouraging them to use their products or services (Peelen et al., 2019).

Creativity is an important factor in creating valuable, relevant, and consistent content (Altamira et al., 2023). Creativity is important in content marketing to stand out from competitors and gain consumers' attention for effective communication (Altamira et al., 2023). Creativity consists of three components: novelty, usefulness, and craftsmanship (Stein, 1953; Mazerant et al., 2021). Content marketers must create distinctive content that sets them apart from their competitors (Peelen et al., 2019). Creative ads successfully grab the audience's attention due to the divergence that creates a contrast with less creative ads (Smith et al., 2008). Original content is also more frequently shared, leading to stronger engagement and more involvement with the brand (Southgate et al., 2010). When

original content is also meaningful and visually appealing, this leads to better ad recall and more favourable attitudes towards the advertisement (Ang et al., 2007; Mazerant et al., 2021). This shows how important it is to create creative content in content marketing.

However, creative processes are restricted by several constraints such as strict regulations, limited time, and limited resources (Acar et al., 2018). These constraints can be categorized into three main categories: input, process, and output constraints (Acar et al., 2018). Following up on the input-process-output (IPO) framework which is broadly used in previous work on creativity (e.g. Hülshager et al., 2009; Acar et al., 2018). Input constraints relate to limited resources such as time, human capital, and budget. Rules and formal procedures belong to the process constraints. Lastly, output constraints refer to specifications of the end product such as certain colours, quality, or product standards (Acar et al., 2018).

Despite the popularity of social media and the importance of creativity in social media content, the constraints on creativity in the content creation process for social media are not fully covered by research (Kraus et al., 2019). Mazarant et al. (2021) found that creativity in social media is context-dependent, but they see creativity as a product instead of the result of creativity in the content creation process. Romeiro & Wood (2015) did focus on the creation process but did this for regular advertisements for TV, radio, websites, newspapers, and magazines. In that context, they found three forces that play a role in the creation process: collective work within a group, time pressure and the balance between originality and acceptance. Kraus et al. (2019) found that limited resources such as time and budget, restrict creativity for social media by small and medium-sized enterprises. However, they did not research the effects of process or output constraints.

For social media, there might be a different set of forces that play a role when developing creative content than in content marketing via other platforms or in new product innovations, due to the quick interactions and ease of access people have via social media (Khan, Swar & Lee, 2014). Also, social media content is created with little capital and in a higher quantity (Altamira et al., 2023). Lastly, brands are limited to specific content formats on social media platforms (Kraus et al., 2019).

So, the content creation process of companies for social media might face different constraints concerning creativity than traditional creativity constraints.

Therefore, this study provides deeper insights into the underlying constraints that influence creativity in content marketing via social media. Furthermore, this study aims to explain where the possibilities for creativity are despite creativity constraints. To achieve this goal, this study tries to answer the following research question: *“How is creativity in content creation for social media constrained?”*. This will be done by conducting in-depth interviews with 13 professional content marketers. By better understanding how creativity in the content creation process is constrained, marketers can more effectively reach their target audience via relevant content in a smooth process of creating creative content.

Theoretical framework

Creativity in content marketing

Creativity is a complex concept and is used in many ways. When we talk about creativity, this could be about a beautiful painting, an innovative idea, or the creation of engaging social media content. To study this multifaceted concept, we need a clear definition of creativity consisting of smaller measurable units (Kaufman & Glăveanu, 2021). Although multiple creativity definitions exist, there is one definition broadly used by researchers. This definition includes two criteria of creativity suggested by Stein (1953): novelty and usefulness. Novelty is the uniqueness of an idea compared to other ideas (Shalley et al., 2004), and is often labelled as originality (Runco & Jaeger, 2012). Other frequently used terms are divergent, unexpected, surprising, and unique (Ang et al., 2007). Ideas and outcomes that are only novel, are meaningless (Ang et al., 2007). Therefore, usefulness is the second criterion of creativity (Runco & Jaeger, 2012). Content is useful when it is relevant, makes sense, is appropriate and meaningful for its audience (Mazerant et al., 2021).

Although novelty and usefulness are commonly acknowledged as the two creativity criteria, a third criterion is suggested for creativity in social media: craftsmanship (Mazerant et al., 2021; White et al., 2002). Craftsmanship relates to how well-crafted the content is (White et al., 2002), referring to the aesthetic visuals of a post (Mazerant et al., 2021). Koslow et al. (2003) explain good craftsmanship as being pleasant to the eye. As social media, such as Instagram and TikTok, is mainly visually oriented, this study agrees that craftsmanship should be considered a third criterion for creativity. Thus, creative content is novel, useful and well-crafted.

Relevance of Creativity in Content Marketing

Creativity in content marketing is important in gaining attention and increasing audience engagement (Ang et al. 2007). Visually appealing content is more likely to receive attention than content having lower craftsmanship, due to the aesthetic motivation of social media users (Mazerant et al., 2021). Unique content gains more attention when combined with usefulness (Ang et al., 2007).

Usefulness is important to keep the attention of the audience and make them engage with the content (Ang et al., 2007). Novel and useful content was found to be better recalled. Furthermore, advertisements that are both useful and novel are more often liked by the audience resulting in more positive brand attitudes (Ang et al., 2012). In addition, well-crafted visual content stimulates information processing and connections to the brand (Lim & Childs, 2020). This is because well-designed imagery leads viewers into an automatic and affective state, generating a positive emotional experience (Lim & Childs, 2020).

Perspectives on Creativity

Creativity can be studied from many perspectives (Kaufman & Glăveanu, 2021). One of the first foundations of creativity research came from Mel Rhodes (1961). Following his historical model, The 4Ps of Creativity, creativity can be viewed from four perspectives: product, process, person and press of the environment (Rhodes, 1961). Recently, Glăveanu (2013) renewed this model into the Five A's Framework consisting of actors, audiences, actions, artefacts, and affordances. The Five A's framework focuses on the interactions between individuals (Kaufman & Glăveanu, 2013). Lastly, an important model is Kaufman & Beghetto's (2009) Four C Model. This model consists of little-c (everyday creativity), big-c (eminent creativity), mini-c (creativity in the learning process) and pro-c (creative professional or expert). The Four C model focuses on the development of a person's creativity.

Despite newer models by Glăveanu (2013) and Kaufman & Beghetto (2009), this study adopts the view of Mel Rhodes (1961) because he specifically distinguishes the creative process. This study aims to determine the role of creativity constraints on the content creation process. The next paragraph will further elaborate on the phases in the creative process.

Creative Process

The creative process according to Lubart (2018, p1.) is *"a sequence of thoughts and actions that comprise the production of work that is original and valuable"*. One of the first researchers who proposed a stage model of creativity was Wallas (1926). He distinguished between four processes. His

first stage is preparation, where information is gathered about the problem and users' needs. Secondly, in the incubation stage, a step back from the problem is taken to rest the mind. You stay open to ideas that come when you are walking the dog or doing the dishes. This is also known as the mind-wandering stage (Huang et al., 2024). The third stage is the illumination stage, where you select the best-fitting solutions (Wallas, 1926). Lastly, in the verification stage, the ideas are elaborated upon and analysed on their usefulness and novelty (Wallas, 1926). This model is still broadly used nowadays (Kaufman & Glăveanu, 2021).

Despite the popularity of Wallas' model (1926), this study follows the creative process model by Amabile (1996). Amabile incorporates the communication of the final output to others in her model. This is a crucial concept in content creation for social media as the goal is to create engaging content that is shared with others. Furthermore, Amabile links her creative process model to the key variables that are necessary for creativity: domain-relevant skills, creativity-relevant processes, and task motivation. This is known as the componential theory (Amabile, 1996). Domain-relevant skills are the knowledge, expertise, skills, intelligence, and talent in the domain (Amabile, 2012). Creativity-relevant processes relate to cognitive abilities and personality traits to take risks and think outside the box (Gabriel et al., 2023). An important factor within creativity-relevant processes is divergent thinking. Divergent thinking is the skill to generate as many different possible solutions to a problem (Kaufman & Glăveanu, 2021). This is one of the two thought processes in Guilford's Structure of Intellect Model (1950). The other thought process, convergent thinking, is the selection of the most suitable solution. Task motivation is the last factor in Amabile's componential theory (1996) and relates to the intrinsic motivation to solve a problem (Gabriel et al., 2023). Amabile (2012) describes task motivation as the motivation to perform an activity out of interest or enjoyment.

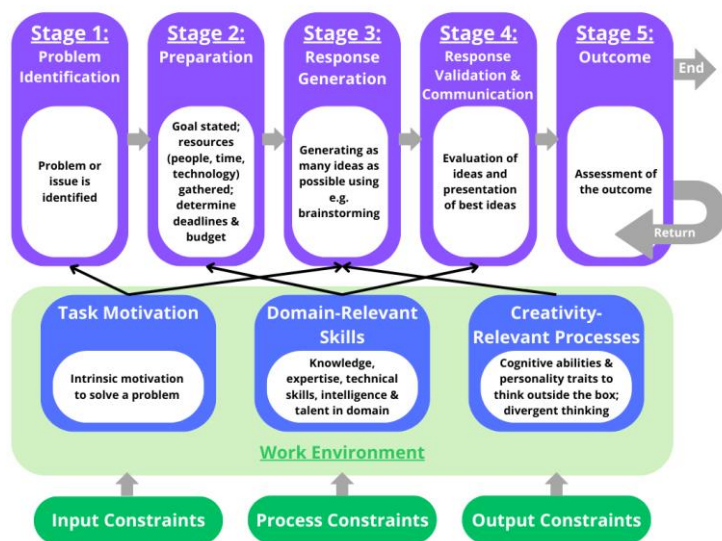
Amabile's creative process model (1996) consists of five stages: 1) problem identification, 2) preparation, 3) response generation, 4) response validation and communication, and 5) outcome. In the first stage, a problem or issue is identified. Here, motivation is an important element. People who enjoy and are motivated by the task will have a higher chance of finding novel problems to work on

(Fisher et al., 2020). For social media content, this includes finding the needs of the target group or topics a company wants to address as a form of agenda setting (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2013). In the second stage, the preparation, resources such as people, technology, and information are gathered (Amabile, 2012). Also, the deadlines and budget are established in this phase (Amabile & Pratt, 2016). Domain-relevant skills are important in this phase, as the expertise to find relevant information and available resources determine the possibilities in the next stages (Amabile, 2012). In the third stage, the ideas are produced (Amabile, 1996). Important techniques to generate ideas as many ideas as possible are brainstorming and divergent thinking (Herring et al., 2009). This is what Amabile (1996) calls the creativity-relevant processes. Again, a strong motivation gives a better chance to find novel and valuable solutions in this stage (Amabile, 2012). In the fourth stage, the ideas are evaluated and the best ideas are presented to the company (Amabile, 2012). This stage depends on domain-relevant skills to ensure that good ideas are used and poor ideas are wasted (Amabile & Pratt, 2016). Lastly, in the fifth stage, the outcome assessment of the company is based on the results of the fourth stage (Amabile, 1996). In the updated model by Amabile & Pratt (2016), this stage is a feedback loop leading back to the previous stages.

This componential model (Figure 1) also includes the work environment around the individual components (domain-relevant skills, creativity-relevant processes, and task motivation) (Amabile, 1996). The work environment is impacted by external influences on the creative process (Amabile & Pratt, 2016). In the literature, these influences on the creative process are also known as creativity constraints (Acar et al., 2018). The following paragraph will discuss the creativity constraints based on the Input-, Process-, Output- (IPO) framework).

Figure 1

Overview Creative Process Model



Creativity constraints

The creative process in content creation is constrained by several forces such as limited resources or organizational factors (Romeiro & Wood, 2015). Following the IPO framework, these forces can be categorized into three types of creativity constraints: input, process, and output (Acar et al., 2018). Each category includes specific constraints in different domains. Most of the research on creativity constraints is focused on other areas such as new product development and product innovation, while the knowledge on creativity constraints in content creation for social media is limited.

Input Constraints

Most research on creativity constraints focuses on input constraints. These input constraints can be categorized into five specific constraints: financial, human resource, equipment, time-related and supply constraints (Acar et al., 2018). Consensus on the influence of financial constraints is lacking (Acar et al., 2018). Song et al. (2007) suggest financial resources are one of the success factors in developing creative ideas. Contradictory, Scopelliti et al. (2013) found that lack of financial resources can boost new idea generation for individuals with a high motivation towards novelty-seeking behaviour (Scopelliti et al., 2013). This links to Amabile's (1996) creativity-relevant processes. Second,

redundant employees or unused capacity can boost creativity as they allow for experimentation with new projects and concepts (Oerlemans & Pretorius, 2008; Bourgeois, 1981). In line with Oerlemans & Pretorius (2008), Acar et al. (2018) found that limited human resources lower creativity due to a lack of motivation.

In the same vein, it was found that time constraints lower intrinsic motivation, and in turn creativity (Amabile, 1996). For instance, tight deadlines put a lot of pressure on individuals to quickly generate ideas. This reduces the engagement in divergent thinking and leads to falling back into familiar solutions (Scopelliti et al., 2013). These findings are in line with the self-determination theory, which proposes that external constraints lower the feeling of self-control and intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). On the other side, Ohly & Fritz (2009) found that time constraints can also be perceived as a challenge, which motivates employees to come up with creative workarounds.

For social media, input constraints might play a different role because it is created with little capital and in a higher quantity (Altamira et al., 2023). First, social media does not require raw materials or machine capacity and is therefore less influenced by supply constraints (Erragcha & Romdhane, 2014). Subsequently, Kraus et al. (2019) found that social media does not require uber-professional equipment to prepare content. They illustrate that taking pictures with smartphone cameras offers sufficient quality. Lastly, as brands, on average, publish three social media posts per week, the frequency rate on social media is higher compared to traditional advertising (Kim et al., 2014). This forces marketers to create creative content with limited time (Kraus et al., 2019).

Process Constraints

Process constraints focus on the rules, procedures or behaviour prescriptions that influence decision-making for creativity (Pierce & Delbecq, 1977; Acar et al., 2018). An important factor in process constraints is job autonomy (Acar et al., 2018). Job autonomy refers to the degree of freedom to choose how to perform a certain task (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). High job autonomy leads to improved intrinsic motivation, creative self-efficacy, and creativity (Liu et al., 2016). Similarly, high formalization – control by the organisation – limits openness and lowers the motivation for creative

behaviour (Pierce & Delbecq, 1977). This is especially applicable in the preparation stage, where all relevant information is gathered (Amabile, 2012). When a company limits the available information and tools that can be used, there will be less creativity present (Amabile, 2012).

From another view, process constraints in the form of guidelines can increase knowledge sharing and trust between colleagues (Brattström et al., 2012). A good example of these guidelines is the use of brainstorming rules in the response generation phase. In brainstorming, people might not share their ideas because of the fear of negative feedback or having to wait for their turn to speak (Brattström et al., 2012). Brainstorming rules, such as developing as many ideas as possible, withdrawing feedback on each other ideas, building on ideas and sharing extreme ideas, boost the overall creativity (Osborn, 1957). These rules improve the skill to generate many different possible solutions to a problem, which was previously labelled as divergent thinking (Guilford, 1950).

Output Constraints

The last type of constraint from the IPO framework are output constraints. These constraints relate to the requirements of the end product. Acar et al. (2018) distinguish between regulations, minimum quality standards and design specifications. Typical creativity regulations in product innovation relate to environmental or privacy regulations by the government (Berrone et al., 2013). On social media, another type of privacy regulation is applicable (Kraus et al., 2019). Here, human faces are important to engagement (Bakhshi et al., 2014). Bakshi et al. (2014) found that photos with faces are 38% more likely to receive likes and 32% more likely to receive comments. This challenges social media marketers as they cannot put someone online without their consent (Tang et al., 2017).

Furthermore, social media pictures must be of high quality (Li & Xie, 2019). On Twitter and Instagram, high-quality pictures lead to higher engagement (Li & Xie, 2019). Kraus et al. (2019) suggest that phone cameras already have high enough quality for social media, whereas Li & Xie (2019) state pictures need to be professionally shot. The skills to generate posts of high quality relate to Amabile's (1996) domain-relevant skills. On social media, engaging content has become more important because consumers decide what content they interact with (Kasper et al., 2019). In

addition, brands are limited to specific formats and size requirements of social media platforms (Kraus et al., 2019). It is also important to keep up with the latest trends to stimulate engagement (Kraus et al., 2019). To build a relationship with the customer, brands should use one integrated brand voice in all social media posts (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Lim & Childs (2020) suggest that visual elements of a social media post are most important to draw attention, communicate the message and build a relationship with the consumer.

Traditionally, such output constraints were seen to hinder creativity, because the constraints focus on consistency and reduction in variety whereas variation and novelty are what creativity needs (Gilson et al., 2005). Rosso (2014) suggests that outcome constraints are more likely to enhance team creativity than input and process constraints because they do not determine how the content should be created. This provides many opportunities to solve the creative challenge using creativity-relevant processes. However, output constraints that are too strict prevent the combination of new elements to form novel outcomes and thus hinder creativity (Acar et al., 2018).

The present study

Summarised, several constraints influence creativity during the creativity process. These constraints can be categorized into input-, output-, and process- constraints (Acar et al., 2018). Despite the importance of creativity in social media content and the popularity of social media, it remains unclear how creativity is constrained and what possibilities creativity has despite the constraints. Therefore, this study aims to provide deeper insights into these constraints by answering the following research question: *“How is creativity in content creation for social media constrained?”*. Four sub-questions have been formulated based on the theoretical framework to answer this question. As previous studies on creativity constraints for social media are lacking, constraints from creativity in other domains, such as new product development, led to this framework. The present study aims to find what specific creativity constraints play a role in content creation for social media.

It was discussed how input constraints, such as time, budget and equipment, influence creativity. Financial constraints can either restrict (Song et al., 2007) or boost creativity for highly

motivated individuals (Scopelliti et al., 2013). Tight deadlines put a lot of pressure on individuals, which lowers intrinsic motivation (Amabile et al., 2002). For social media, input constraints might play a different role because it is created with little capital and in a higher quantity (Altamira et al., 2023). Furthermore, brands need consistent posting on social media, forcing marketers to develop creative ideas. Therefore, the first subquestion is: *“How do input constraints influence creativity in content creation for social media?”*

Subsequently, it was shown how high formalization lowers the motivation for creative behaviour. Job autonomy is needed for intrinsic motivation, creative self-efficacy and creativity. Contradictory, brainstorming guidelines could increase knowledge sharing and trust, stimulating creativity (Brattström et al., 2012). Although the creative process for social media follows similar stages as in other branches, the constraints affecting this content creation process have not become apparent leading to the second subquestion: *“How do process constraints influence creativity in content creation for social media?”*

Thirdly, it was discussed how output constraints influence creativity. Whereas human faces stimulate engagement (Bakhshi et al., 2014), marketers cannot always use people in their content if, for instance, no employees want to be on camera (Tang et al., 2017). Also, the quality of social media pictures can influence creativity (Li & Xie, 2019). Lastly, platforms offer specific content requirements, such as size and format (Kraus et al., 2019). This might bring new creativity constraints specific to social media. Therefore, the third subquestion is: *“How do output constraints influence creativity in content creation for social media?”*

Lastly, this study agrees that social media differs from other branches due to the quick interaction, selective attention and ease of access (Erragcha & Romdhane, 2014; Ho et al., 2020). Therefore, there might also be new opportunities for creativity despite the constraints. Consequently, this study not only tries to get better insights into the creativity constraints but also exploratory discover the new possibilities social media provides for creativity. This has led to the fourth subquestion: *“What possibilities are there for creativity in content creation for social media?”*

Method

Participants

For the study, 13 Dutch marketers creating social media content for companies were recruited via purposive sampling (2 male, 11 female). Purposive sampling is an effective method to study experts within a specific domain (Tongco, 2007). The professionals were aged between 20 and 57 ($M = 30.3$, $SD = 11.7$). Further information about the participant's age, degree, years of experience and expertise can be found in Table 1. The participants voluntarily participated in this study. For this study, the checklist concerning student research with human participants, as drawn up by the Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences, was followed.

Table 1

Background information of the participants

Participant	Age	Experience in years	Expertise
P01	21	2	General
P02	23	4	Graphic design
P03	21	1	Content creation
P04	23	3	Branded copywriting
P05	21	2	General
P06	40	12	Content creation
P07	25	3	TikTok marketing
P08	28	7	Strategy
P09	57	31	Strategy
P10	33	13	Project manager
P11	23	4	General
P12	49	26	Communication strategy
P13	31	5	Visual branding

Sampling

The number of interviewees is based on research by Francis et al. (2010) on data saturation. Usually, interviews are held until no new information is gathered: the saturation point (Baker & Edwards, 2012). Francis et al. (2010), propose two stages to determine the saturation point. They suggest an initial sample of ten interviewees, followed by three more interviews to control if all information is known. This aligns with research by Guest et al. (2006), who suggest twelve interviews to reach the saturation point. Other research on input constraints for social media by Kraus et al. (2019) only conducted eight interviews. As all interviewees have the same specialism in social media marketing, similar experiences between experts are expected. Tongco (2007) suggests that for purposive sampling at least five experts within a field should be interviewed. These suggestions led to the criterion of at least 13 interviews. Only when a lot of new information is gathered with the last few interviews, more interviews will be held.

For purposive sampling, it is important to set up criteria that must be fulfilled to prevent interviewing unqualified participants (Tongco, 2007). This study used the following criteria in selecting the participants. The participants must have at least one year of experience as a content creator for social media. The interviewees must furthermore work at least two full working days on content creation for social media in a professional capacity. This criterion was made to prevent marketers from being unable to participate because they also work on other marketing activities, which is often the case.

Dual method approach

To discover what constraints marketers face and how this impacts their creativity during their daily work, qualitative methods are more suitable than quantitative methods because qualitative methods gather rich data and give a detailed understanding of the participants' experiences (Schultze & Avital, 2010). Qualitative methods are well suited to gain new insights via experiences, motivations, and behaviour (Creswell, 2014). Specifically, this study applies a dual-method approach as previously used in research on creativity and design (Celikoglu, 2017). First, the cultural probes technique was

used, followed by individual semi-structured interviews. The cultural probes made the participants think about creativity beforehand to sensitise them to the topic under study for a better conversation about the topic (Visser et al., 2005). Subsequently, the interviews provided the participants with opportunities to illustrate their views and experiences. This dual-method approach has previously been shown to provide in-depth insights and rich data (Celikoglu, 2017). The cultural probe package and the interview guide can be found in the appendix.

Cultural Probe Package

Creativity is an abstract subject that is hard to think about (Reid & Petocz, 2004). Although the participants experience creativity constraints in their daily work, it was a plausible possibility that they had never consciously contemplated this topic before. This is because the creativity process consists of unconscious processes and creative solutions can suddenly pop up in the mind (Ritter et al., 2012). People who never thought about these processes before may struggle to accurately report on the constraints that restrict this process (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). To prevent the collection of shallow data, a cultural probe package was used. The goal was to create context awareness and get the user to think about their feelings regarding the topic beforehand (Visser et al., 2005).

Cultural probes contain small tasks that participants work on for a couple of minutes (Gaver et al., 1999). These tasks are completed before the interview and help the participant to think about the topic beforehand. The probes also help the participants during the interview to illustrate their experiences with concrete examples. It gives the researcher the possibility to immerse in participants' environments and gain insights into specific constraints and opportunities. Furthermore, the probes provide a form of ownership for the participants leading to more engagement and collaboration in the research process (Conrad & Campbell, 2008). The cultural probe technique prevents the participants from being unable to answer the questions related to the topic during the interview (Visser et al., 2005). For this study, the cultural probe package of De Rooij (2021) was adopted and adjusted to match the topic of this study. This has led to three probes: a postcard, a notebook, and a percentage sheet.

The cultural probe package was delivered to the participants approximately one week before the interview, to provide them with enough flexibility to work on the assignment, while keeping their memories fresh. They were instructed to spend five to ten minutes on each task, preferably when working on social media content creation. The three cultural probes will now be discussed in more detail.

Postcard. The first probe contained an empty postcard and made the participants think about what creativity is and its role in their daily work. This ensured the participants were aware of their understanding of creativity and how this impacts their work. This method was already suggested by Gaver et al. (1999) as it is an informal method which makes it easy for the participant to write and visualize an abstract concept. The participants were instructed to imagine they would send the postcard to someone who started studying content marketing. This was done to encourage the participant to describe what creativity means as a content marketer. The following instruction was given to the participants:

“Imagine you have to send a postcard to someone who just started studying content marketing. Explain to that person what creativity means for you as a content marketer. Use one side of this card to describe creativity and try to visualise creativity on the other side.”

The postcard method has previously been shown to be insightful for both the participant and the researcher, while the effort is relatively low (Thoring et al., 2013). It made the participant think about creativity, making it easier to elaborate on the concept during the interview. This probe also formed the base for the next probes where the focus is put upon the constraints that impact creativity. The researcher followed the participant’s description of creativity during the interview.

Notebook. The most used cultural probe item is the notebook (Thoring et al., 2013). This study applied this method to get insight into when and how creativity gets constrained during content creation. The participants received the following instruction:

“During the week, write down all the occasions when creativity was restricted during your work. What were you doing at that moment? What constraint restricted your creativity? And how did you handle this creativity constraint? You can also write down occasions you’ve experienced in previous projects before this week.”

The notebook method is one of the most interesting tasks for participants because of the freedom and insights this method gives (Thoring et al., 2013). The participants were free to decide how much time and effort they would spend on this task, which improves the descriptive validity of this study.

Percentages. To make participants more aware of the impact each constraint has during content creation for social media, a sheet of paper was provided with several creativity constraints. Participants could use this sheet to assign percentages (up to 100%), indicating the extent to which each creativity constraint restricted their creative process. The sheet consisted of several input, process, and output constraints and was based on Acar et al.’s (2018) taxonomy of creativity constraints. They provided 11 specific creativity constraints. The supply constraint was left out as this does not apply to social media and some constraints were slightly adjusted to fit the content creation process for social media. Appendix 2 lists the 10 constraints suggested on the sheet. Since there may be other creativity constraints affecting social media content creation, the participant was also given enough space to come up with constraints on their own. The percentages will also be used during the interview to compare with the occasion of creativity constraints as written down in the notebook. If for instance a lot of occasions took place where deadlines restricted creativity, but a low percentage was assigned to deadlines this was discussed with the participants.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The second phase of the dual method approach involves individual, semi-structured interviews with the participants, following Celikoglu et al.’s (2017) design. The purpose of this method is to describe and clarify the real-life experiences of content marketers. This method captures realistic insights about the participants’ experiences as they engage in a conversation with the researcher who

asks direct questions about the context and interpretations of the participants (Schultze & Avital, 2010). During the interview, the participants could use the cultural probes to reflect on occasions they had previously encountered. Furthermore, participants were encouraged to give examples from their cultural probes. For instance, if participants talked about constraints, they were motivated to use examples from their notebooks. The interview was semi-structured to keep enough space for the participants to discuss relevant topics more elaborately and for the researcher to pose follow-up questions (Schultze & Avital, 2010). However, there were pre-established questions to set the main structure and topics of the interview.

The interviews began with the collection of demographic details. Subsequently, the participant's understanding of creativity was discussed and it was determined how creativity impacts their daily work using the postcard. Furthermore, the focus was put on the different constraints that impact creativity. In this stage, the notebook probe was utilized to get real-life examples of creativity constraints. These questions focused on answering the first three sub-questions by splitting up the specific constraints into the input, process, and output constraint types. Lastly, the possibilities for creativity were researched by asking questions to the participants about the room for creativity despite the constraints. The interviews ended with the opportunity for the participants to give additional information or ask questions to the researcher. The full interview guide can be found in Appendix 1.

Procedure

All interviews were held in Dutch. The researcher who conducted the interviews is a social media marketer himself, leading to an increased interpretation validity. Each participant's consent was secured to audio-record the interview. When the participants agreed to participate in the study, their consent was secured whereafter the cultural probe package was delivered. The interviews took place at participant's office (P01, P04, P08, P09, P11, P12, P13), at home (P06), at a barista (P05) or via Microsoft Teams (P02, P03, P07, P10). After thirteen interviews, no new information was discovered

among the participants. Similar patterns were detected and therefore, it was assumed saturation was reached.

Data analysis

The interviews were fully transcribed based using Whisper AI. Whisper AI is found to be the most accurate automated transcription tool (Wolling-Giering et al., 2024). Furthermore, the tool can transcribe interviews conducted in Dutch and be implemented on local computers to address privacy and ethical concerns (Spiller et al., 2023). This tool is used because transcribing the interviews manually is a time-consuming activity (Wolling-Giering et al., 2024). The accuracy of the transcripts was checked by the researcher and adjusted to match the audio recordings.

The transcripts were used to identify the main themes and find similar patterns across the participants. To do so, a coding scheme was created. A conventional content analysis was combined with a direct approach analysis to make sure no data was overlooked (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). A conventional content analysis focuses on data-driven codes, while a direct approach analysis focuses on theory-driven codes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). To start, the main themes from the literature were selected (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2010). For this study, Amabile's (1996) creative process and Acar et al's (2018) IPO framework were used for the coding scheme. Subsequently, adjustments to the coding scheme were made based on the data discovered in the interviews. During the interviews, participants named new constraints not previously discussed in the IPO framework (Acar et al., 2018). Therefore a row with "*other constraints*" was added to the table. Also, information for general information on creativity and room for creativity possibilities was added after the interviews. The final coding scheme can be found in Figure 2.

Each interview was read at least two times to assign the content of the interview into the coding scheme following the setup by Willadsen et al. (2019). This was done by the same researcher who conducted the interviews to establish the inter-rater reliability. Other coders possibly lack background knowledge and mental context as they did not attend the interviews (Barbour, 2001). This led to a

complete overview of all collected data during the interviews. Based on the coding scheme, the role of different constraints on creativity in content creation for social media could be analysed.

Figure 2

The coding scheme used to analyse the interviews

Participant: PXX	General	Creative Process				
	<u>Creativity in social media content</u>	<u>Problem identification</u>	<u>Preparation</u>	<u>Response generation</u>	<u>Response validation & communication</u>	<u>Outcome</u>
<u>General information</u>						
<u>Input constraints</u>						
<u>Process constraints</u>						
<u>Output constraints</u>						
<u>Other constraints</u>						
<u>Possibilities</u>						

Results

Definitions

Creativity

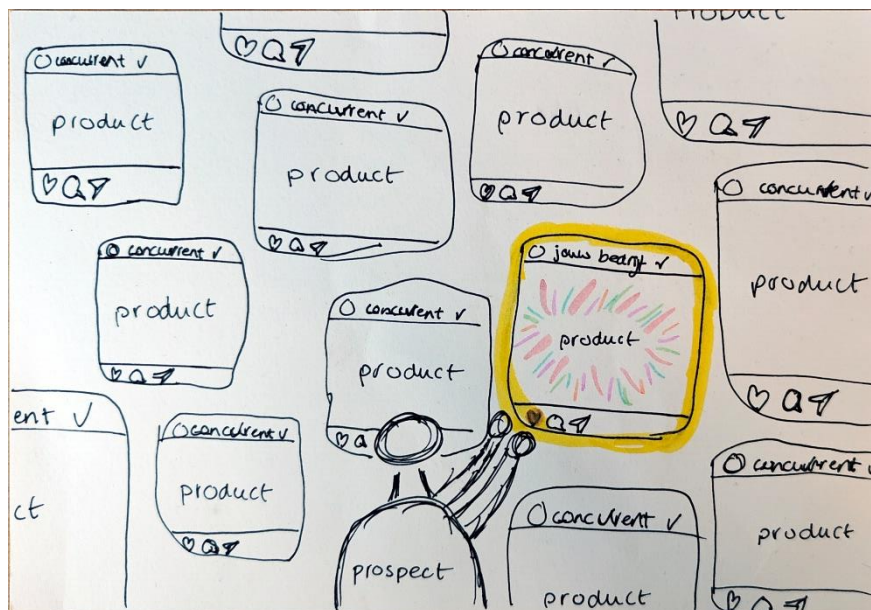
When the participants were asked what creativity is to them, most of them explained they found it hard to write down a concise definition as it is such a complex concept (P01, P02, P04, P05, P08, P09, P10, P12, P13). As P09 described, *“I have worked in the creative field my entire life and never figured out what creativity is. It is so vast.”*

However, after some struggle, all participants came up with a definition of creativity containing elements similar to Mazerant et al's (2021) creativity concept. They referred to creativity as being something *“new”* and *“original”* (P01, P02, P04, P06, P07, P10, P11, P12, P13), which matches Stein's (1953) novelty criteria. Furthermore, all participants mentioned that the content should be *“meaningful or relevant to the audience”*, which aligns with the usefulness criteria by Stein (1953). The added criteria by Mazerant et al. (2021), craftsmanship, was also frequently mentioned by the participants (P01, P02, P05, P06, P07, P08, P10, P11, P12, P13). The definition of P01 captured these concepts together: *“For me, creativity means producing innovative content that looks good and consistently appeals to customers. Creativity triggers your customers. If you are not original or interesting, people will lose interest.”*

P05 explained creativity using the postcard from the cultural probe toolbox. She visualized (Figure 3) and explained that social media content needs to *“stand out”* by being different from the rest in a certain way (P05). This shows how creativity in content creation for social media plays a similar role as in other fields, such as regular advertising and new product development.

Figure 3

Visualization of creativity on the postcard



Creative Process

The creative process described by the participants was similar to Amabile's (1996) creative process. All participants started their creative process by finding a problem or issue. In some cases, participants came up with problems themselves (P01, P02, P04, P08, P09, P10, P12, P13), while others relied on input from the companies they worked for (P03, P05, P06, P07, P11). Many participants tended to start generating content ideas when faced with a problem (P01, P02, P03, P05, P06, P07, P09, P11, P12). Only P04, P08, P10 and P13 described a preparation stage., other participants skipped this stage. The generation of ideas was either done by individuals in mind (P01, P03, P05, P06, P11), on paper (P02, P04, P13) or directly discussed in a group (P07, P08, P10). After the ideas were generated, the best idea was selected, thought out and presented to colleagues (P06, P08) or clients (P01, P02, P05, P13) for feedback. Participants then either published or planned the content or returned to a previous stage, depending on the feedback they received.

Creativity constraints

Input Constraints

Lack of time. One of the factors that constrains creativity in content creation for social media is time. For many participants, time is the most challenging constraint. They describe that for creative solutions, time is needed (P01, P04, P06, P07, P08, P13). Especially in the response generation phase, time is important to generate different ideas (P01, P07, P08). However, the available time for brainstorming is limited (P07, P08, P13). As P01 explains, *“Creativity cannot be forced within a certain time frame. I need time to come up with new content ideas during brainstorming sessions.”*

P01 described that for social media, time is even a more challenging constraint than for other activities. He describes that the *“urge for consistency”* forces him to quickly generate content ideas.

Lack of tools. The limitation of tools is a constraint most present in the content production phase. After the ideas have been developed, and the actual content needs to be crafted, tools help to translate the creative concept into reality. Tools that enable creativity are for example Photoshop (P02, P05, P06, P13), Canva (P01, P03, P11), professional camera (P13), and automatic posting tools (P01, P03, P05, P06, P07, P10, P11). Without access to these tools that help to create visual images, it becomes more difficult to create creative outcomes (P02, P03, P13). However, P01 explains that social media content can more easily be created with free software and the smartphone-camera, as the quality is good enough. Automatic posting tools help optimize the process, so more time is available to develop creative ideas (P01, P05, P06, P11). Next to the access to technology, also the use of these tools can constrain creativity (P01, P11, P13). P13 gives an example of her camera:

“Sometimes I have something in mind, but I am not able to execute it technically. For instance, my camera might not cooperate, or with video, a shot might not be in focus. That is also something that holds me back (P13).”

This also happens for editing tools where sometimes it just *“doesn’t work out”* the way a post was set up in the mind (P01, P02, P11). Consequently, people accept that they are less satisfied with the final outcome (P01, P08, P11) or return to another idea to execute (P02, P07).

Lack of financial resources. This final input constraint, budget, relates to the previously mentioned constraints. Budget is needed to spend time on brainstorming (P06, P08, P09, P13), hiring professionals (P02, P04, P13), and buying the technological tools that are needed (P01, P05, P08). In other words, the budget influences the available time and tools. Another way the budget is used in social media marketing is for advertising (P06, P10, P11). However, none of the participants associated this with creativity. Another view on financial resources, mainly from freelancers and agencies, is that you either accept or don't accept a budget (P02, P04, P06, P09, P13). When a budget is accepted, this does not further influence creativity. P02 explains:

“Well, within a budget it's just a matter of agreeing, yes or no. Nine out of ten times, it's already an agreement that has been made. So I don't find it very troublesome, because it's often already agreed upon (P02).”

P06 agrees with this view and describes that after she agrees on a budget, she just wants to “execute something as well as possible”. P04 even thinks that budget is “an excuse” by companies to not start using social media as a tool for their marketing activities.

Process Constraints

Influences by company. During the creative process, all participants talked about the influence of a client as a constraint on creativity. This influence is present in the problem identification stage (P01, P02, P03, P04, P08, P09, P11), response generation stage (P02, P05, P07, P10, P13), and the evaluation of the outcome (P01, P05, P06, P08, P12). When the problem is identified, a company often approaches the marketer with a specific issue (P01, P03, P09, P11). P11 explains this by stating:

“I am very dependent on the input I receive from the office. That determines what we are going to share. So, I am not free to be very creative with the topics we want to address. I perceive freedom in how we share something (P11).”

This example shows how she fully depends on the problems a company wants to share, but how she can decide herself which designs or formats she uses. For other participants (P02, P04, P08, P09), there is more room in the first stage of the creative process. P09 describes his experience: “The

client already has a certain problem in mind. But sometimes, it is necessary to challenge this perception and adjust the strategy. [...] Sometimes, we must investigate whether a problem occurs in practice."

This marketer explores the market the client operates in, to see if the problem is "real". He tests the input of their client. This could be seen as a baseline, where the final problem is identified after interference of the experts. Another way the company constrains creativity is by setting boundaries for generating ideas (P02, P05, P07, P10, P12, P13). P02 and P07 experience less freedom for creative concepts if a company is "very strict in their regulations". P05 describes that companies think "within set boundaries" and P13 feels this as being "pushed in a certain direction". P05 captures these feelings of companies being stuck in old thinking patterns with this statement: "Companies are often conservative. Sometimes it's okay to be a bit less so."

Lastly, participants experience the company's influence on the creative process's actual outcome (P01, P05, P06, P08, P12). Sometimes, when the final concept is presented to the company, the content needs adjustments because of the feedback from the company. This can be small adjustments like "colours" (P01, P08), or the "word syntax" (P01, P05). P08 sees this as "a matter of taste", and thus feels this less as a restriction because it does not downgrade the creative idea. It only changes the looks. However, there are also occasions when a company is not pleased with the concept of a social media post (P02, P05, P06, P12). In this scenario, the marketers returned to a previous stage to improve the solution to the problem. P02 explains: "The creative process is an ongoing cycle from idea, execution and improvement. [...] If a company is unsatisfied with the result, you must improve it to make it work."

Low mental state. An interesting phenomenon that was not present in previous studies on creativity constraints (Acar et al., 2018), is the mental state of the participants (P01, P02, P04, P05, P07, P09, P10, P12, P13). As previously described, some participants experience creativity as ideas that suddenly pop up in the mind (P09, P12). P10 explains how her mental state impacts creativity:

“If you try to force yourself to come up with something creative, I think it diminishes your creativity. For me, creative ideas pop up when I’m in the shower, taking a walk, or sitting on the couch in the evening (P10).”

For instance, if someone is tired or has a busy day, creativity is “*completely gone*” (P01) or “*less present*” (P07, P13). Also, the location determines someone’s mental state. Participants describe less creativity inside their office (P01, P10).

Output Constraints

Standards. An important constraint regarding the final content are the standards of social media posts (P01, P02, P03, P04, P05, P06, P07, P10, P11, P12, P13). On social media, most companies use a brand identity existing of recognisable colours (P01, P02, P05, P07, P10, P11, P12), fonts (P01, P05, P06, P13) and tone of voice (P01, P04, P08, P12). To translate the brand identity into social media content, marketers often work with a standard template, which limits creativity (P05, P10, P11, P12). P05 explains: *“To ensure everything looks neat on the feed, we use a Canva template. This limits my creativity since the colours and other visual aspects are already determined. I can only change the image and the title.”* Another standard regards the formats on social media. Social media restricts certain post types such as reels, stories, carousels and single images. This influences marketers’ creativity (P01, P02, P03, P04, P05, P06, P07, P12). Post characteristics that constrain creativity are “*size*” (P02, P03, P05), “*video length*” (P03, P07), “*number of characters*” (P04, P06) and “*available commercial sounds*” (P07).

Privacy. Another factor that influences creativity is privacy (P03, P07, P10, P11). This is a struggle for marketers because they “*can’t just film everyone and share it on social media*” (P03, P07, P10). P11 clarifies: *“I do see privacy as a limitation. People ultimately connect with other people. If no one wants to be on camera, it becomes difficult, and I notice that a post gets significantly fewer views.”* To handle these constraints, P07 works with fixed content creators who are willing to become the face of a company. However, this brings up another problem as the creator might not always fit

the brand (P07). For companies that sell products (P11) or share information via graphics (P08), privacy is not a problem.

Algorithm. Lastly, a new constraint was found specifically applicable to social media: the algorithm (P01, P03, P06, P07, P08, P10). As the algorithm determines what content goes viral and gets the most exposure, marketers find it important to *“keep up with the newest trends”* (P03) and *“learn the trick of the algorithm to keep the engagement high”* (P06). A clear example is the text in social media posts (P03, P08). An image on Instagram should not contain *“too much text”* (P03, P08), this limit lies around 20% (P08). This constrains creativity by limiting the amount of words that can be used to grab the attention. Another *“trick”* (P06) to play upon the algorithm is consistency (P06, P07, P10). A post will have a higher exposure when published at the same moment each week (P06, P07). This pushes the marketers to keep posting at the same frequency rates and create creative content, while creativity can’t be forced (P03, P05, P06, P09, P10, P12).

Solutions to Creativity Constraints

Set up a clear strategy. A way to handle the creativity constraints is to create a clear strategy beforehand (P04, P08, P09, P12, P13). A clear brand strategy created by the company and the marketer helps to *“speak the same language”* (P04) and tell the *“unique story”* (P08) of a company. This leads to less influence by the company on the creative process (P04, P08, P09, P12, P13) as *“the story we want to tell is already there”* (P12). P12 explains how she experiences freedom after the brand story is created: *“Nowadays, I have carte blanche with my social media clients. I publish all posts independently without consulting the client. This is possible because the story we want to tell is already very clearly outlined.”*

This brand story can also be created visually via a *“mood board”* (P13) that shows the *“vibes”* (P13) a company wants to give. Another method to get less influenced by the client is by leveraging *“expert status”* (P04, P05, P06, P13). P06 illustrates: *“I do discuss with the client how something should look. Ultimately, I am the expert in the field, so I try to advise them on this.”* P04 adds: *“Also be*

very critical of companies and examine their message: ask probing questions and honestly say if you think that isn't the message they truly want to convey."

Acceptance of something less. Another way to handle creativity constraints is to agree on a less elaborate outcome (P02, P05, P07, P08, P09, P10, P11, P13). This solution focuses more on the actual production of the outcome. With limited time, the execution of a concept will be less elaborate (P08, P10, P11, P13). P08 gives the example of time as a constraint on an animated video:

"With less time, we can invest less time in animations for, for example, reels. We can animate everything in detail, like the eyes of a character blinking, but if we have less time, it becomes a simpler animation. However, sometimes you can effectively convey your message even with a simpler execution (P08)."

The company's influences also cause the outcome to be less favourable in the eyes of the marketer (P02, P05, P07, P08, P09, P10, P13). In the end *"the client has the final say"* (P02), so if the client wants a less effective concept, the marketers must adhere to it. Or in other words: *"the customer is always right"* (P13). P07 gives an example: *"Companies don't always understand what works on TikTok. If they don't want to engage humorously, we do listen to their wishes. However, we indicate that the results will be disappointing."*

Boost your creativity

As discussed before, creativity *"cannot be forced"* (P01). However, creativity can be boosted according to the participants (P01, P04, P07, P10, P12, P13). A way to boost your creativity is by talking (P04, P05, P12, P13). *"Talking with employees"* (P04, P05) or with *"inspirational entrepreneurs"* (P04, P12, P13) positively impacts the mental state of the participants. Furthermore, a stimulating environment boosts creativity (P01, P04, P07, P10, P13). *"Going outside"* (P01, P07, P10, P13), *"visiting inspiring lectures"* (P04) or *"watching art"* (P12) increases the creativity of the participants.

Other solutions. Next to the previous three solutions, some more solutions were presented in specific interviews. P02 explained that she always shares three concepts with the client: *"I often*

create three concepts: one as I envision it, one as the company sees it, and one outside both of our comfort zones.” She experiences that companies often choose the concept outside their comfort zone. Another solution is good planning to manage the time constraint (P01, P02, P04). Good planning can help to optimize the available time to come up with creative content. This could be a *“fixed moment in the week”* (P04), *“where enough time is planned”* (P01).

Future Possibilities

AI. One element that participants saw as a future possibility for creativity was the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) (P01, P04, P05, P06, P10, P12, P13). AI in content creation for social media is used for inspiration (P01, P04, P05, P10, P13), generating images (P01, P05), generating captions (P06) and as photoshop assistant (P13). P04 explains: *“AI can be very useful for finding inspiration for new content ideas.”* However, participants also see the current shortcomings of AI tools (P01, P04, P06, P10, P12, P13). P06 and P12 mention they *“directly see”* when content is generated by AI. Furthermore, AI lacks creativity (P01, P04, P12). P01 clarifies: *“The outcome of AI-generated posts will never be as creative as a human post because AI is trained on things that have already been done.”* Despite these shortcomings, the participants feel that this technology can further improve in the future and can be used more and more to improve creativity (P01, P04, P12). P01 notices: *“ChatGPT [form of AI] is not yet good enough to fully develop an idea, both visually and textually. However, there are certainly opportunities for this in the future (P01).”*

New formats. Next to the future use of AI, participants also see new formats on social media as future possibilities for creativity (P03, P05, P09). New formats could be augmented reality (AR) (P09), holograms (P05) and the mixed technology of AR and virtual reality (VR) that is used with the Apple Vision Pro (P03). P03 explains how new formats can boost creativity: *“Formats and sizes will renew in the future. You already see this with the Apple Vision Pro, which provides new content possibilities (P03).”*

Discussion

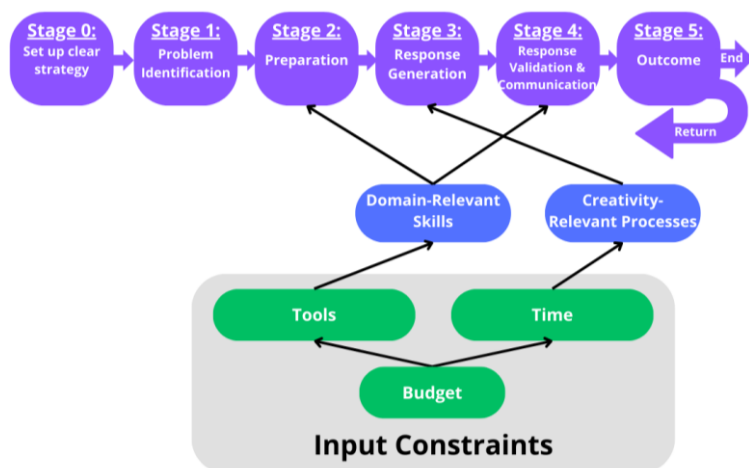
Prior research found that the creative process is constrained by input, process and output constraints (Acar et al., 2018). This study applies this IPO framework specifically to creativity in the content creation process for social media. We aimed to examine in more detail what specific input, process and output constraints affect the creative process for social media, and what room creativity has despite these constraints.

Input Constraints Affecting the Creative Process

For social media content creation, this study argues that input constraints *set the stage* for the creative process. More specifically, this study found, in line with Bourgeois (1981), that financial resources provide possibilities for creativity, but this study suggests this happens only indirectly. The budget determines how much time can be invested and which tools can be purchased, which in turn increases room for creativity. Whereas Figure 4 shows the creative process as linear steps, in practice, stages are skipped or taken in a different order. The visual model is a simplification of the real creative process. For instance, marketers often skip the preparation stage and immediately start brainstorming. They can also return to the idea generation phase if it turns out that a developed concept is not effective or does not fulfil the client's requirements.

Figure 4

Input constraints on social media creation



First, the available time determines the room to generate creative solutions. Especially on social media time constraints have a big influence due to the need for consistent posting. While this study agrees that creativity cannot be forced (Amabile, 1996; Scopelliti et al., 2013), tight content deadlines put a lot of pressure on individuals to develop new content ideas. Less time to come up with new ideas leads to falling back on familiar solutions during the response generation phase. Good planning can help to optimize the available time, but cannot eliminate time constraints.

Subsequently, the available tools determine how the solution will be executed. Tools are important to create appealing social media content, similar to how equipment is important for creativity in innovation projects (Weiss et al., 2017). Without the tools, marketers cannot execute their expertise and skills in creating appealing content. This finding is critical to Kraus et al's (2019) suggestion that enterprises do not need professional tools for social media. A reason might be the shift to more visually oriented media such as Instagram and TikTok, which increases the importance of professional tools to create appealing content. As expected, this study did not find supply constraints, as social media does not need raw materials or machine capacity (Erragcha & Romdhane, 2014). More surprisingly this study did not discover human resource constraints for creativity, contradictory to Acar et al's (2018) model. Most marketers argue they have enough specialism themselves or in their team that is needed during the content creation process. Another explanation might be that social media marketers often work as freelancers or in small agencies, which reduces the possibility of redundant employees or unused capacity.

Process Constraints Affecting the Creative Process

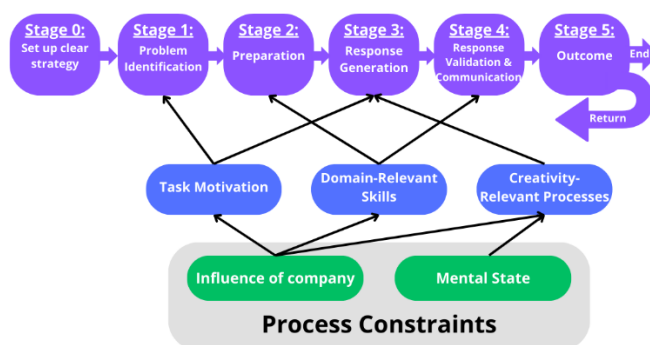
This study found that the influence of a company constrains creativity during the whole creative process. When a company approaches marketers with strict regulations, this lowers their motivation for the task aligning with theories on job autonomy (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) and formalization (Pierce & Delbecq, 1977). Additionally, companies often think within boundaries and thereby limit the room for domain-relevant skills and creativity-relevant processes. Companies don't always trust the expertise of marketers or their ability to come up with new ideas. Amabile (2012)

found that companies only influence the preparation stage. The present study augments these insights by showing that social media marketers also experience influence in later stages, such as the response generation and validation stages. This study establishes the feedback loops that were added in 2016 (Amabile & Pratt): marketers often return to a previous stage when a concept is disapproved by the client. This influence can also lead to the acceptance of a less satisfied outcome by the marketer. Another way to handle the influence of a company is to create a clear brand strategy when telling a company's story, both textually and visually. Because the marketer develops a clear strategy in collaboration with the company beforehand, this lowers their influence during the content creation process. This step could be seen as stage zero in the creative process as visualised in Figure 5 and extends the original model by Amabile & Pratt (2016).

On top of the influence of the company, also the mental state of the participants influences the creativity-relevant processes. Creative ideas suddenly pop up in the mind, which Wallas (1926) described as the incubation stage. He described how people unconsciously rest their minds while staying open to new ideas when performing other activities. This study found that inside the office or on busy days less creative ideas pop up. Their mental state turned into a less creative state, leading to less cognitive ability to think outside the box. However, this mental state can be boosted by talking to other people, going outside, visiting inspiring lectures or watching art. Subsequently, this increases the generation of new ideas. The process constraints are visualized in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Process constraints on social media creation

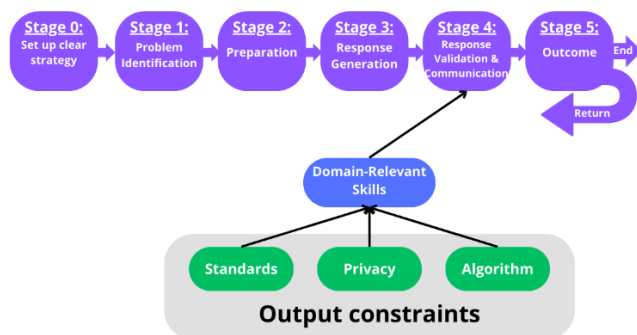


Output Constraints Affecting the Creative Process

Lastly, this study found three output constraints: standard, privacy and algorithm (Figure 6). Firstly, standards that limit creativity are usage of a recognizable brand identity consisting of colours, fonts and tone of voice. This elaborates on Ashely & Tuten's (2015) suggestion for one integrated brand voice. Also, the format requirement extends the existing view by Kraus et al. (2019) who focus on size requirements. This study found video length, number of characters and available sounds as format requirements. Secondly, human faces are important for engagement (Bakhshi et al., 2014). Marketeers agree with this importance but struggle when people from a company don't want to be on camera. Thirdly, marketers try to fulfil the algorithm's requirements to stimulate brand engagement. To do so, they need to ensure their content doesn't contain too much text and is shared at consistent times. This can be linked to what Kraus et al. (2019) described as keeping up with the trends. However, the idea that this constrains creativity is new.

Together, these output constraints impact how marketers utilize their knowledge, expertise and skills to create engaging content. Marketers collect all output requirements and try to commit the final content to these requirements. It is important to notice that the output constraints only influence how the final content looks, but unlike input and process constraints, don't determine how the content is made during the creation process. This aligns with Rosso (2014) who described that because output constraints do not determine how the content should be created, this provides a lot of possibilities for creativity-relevant processes. Only when output constraints are too strict, this leads to suboptimal outcomes in the eyes of the marketer, confirming the view by Acar et al. (2018).

Figure 6

Output constraints on social media creation**Limitations**

Next to the inevitable limits regarding the qualitative design of this study, such as the limited generalizability due to the non-random sample, sample size and the researcher and participant biases, the following limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study.

First, most participants stated they found creativity a hard topic to consciously think about. Previous findings also indicated the creativity process consists of unconscious processes (Ritter et al., 2012). Although the cultural probe package helped the participants to think about creativity beforehand, creativity remains difficult to talk about. This threatens the construct validity since the interviewees might still not be aware of all the creative processes that are going on in their minds.

Second, many participants were engaged in various marketing roles such as copywriting, graphic designing and brand strategy development. Consequently, they found it difficult to delineate the specific constraints unique to creativity in social media content creation. Despite the explicit instruction to limit their answers to creativity in social media, their different marketing roles may blur the boundaries of what is being measured. This limitation is a potential threat to the study's construct validity. Furthermore, all participants were Dutch and participants often worked on a freelance basis. This is relevant for the results' external validity.

Future Research

This study provides insights into how creativity in the content creation process for social media is constrained. This study made no distinction between different social media platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok and LinkedIn. As each platform has its own characteristics (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021), an interesting future study would be to study creativity constraints in more detail for each platform. For instance, a comparative study could be done on specialized marketers in each platform. Where this study suggests several ways to handle creativity constraints, such as good planning or writing a clear brand strategy, these possibilities should be studied in more detail to see the effects of these solutions. An observational study can test whether marketers who first write a brand strategy experience less influence by a company than marketers without a brand strategy. Furthermore, this study shortly touches upon new future possibilities such as AI and new content formats. It would be interesting to study how these possibilities provide new chances for creativity. A last suggestion for future research is to study creativity constraints for different company sizes. This study found that when more people are involved, it becomes harder to generate creative ideas. This provides a good opportunity for future research to compare the effects of creativity constraints for different company sizes.

Conclusion

This study aimed to provide deeper insights into the constraints that play a role in creativity during content creation for social media and explain where the possibilities for creativity are. Eight creativity constraints were found specific for creativity in social media content creation, divided into three input-, two process- and three output constraints. Time, tools and budget were found as input constraints. For the process constraints, the influence of a company and the mental state of the marketer were discovered to affect creativity. Lastly, social media has three constraints related to the output: standards, privacy issues, and algorithms. In addition, this study also found some possible solutions for creativity in content creation for social media despite the constraints. First, a clear brand strategy reduces the influence of a company as the main focus for social media is already set up.

Second, the mental state of marketers can be boosted by interacting with other people, walking outside or doing other activities while unconsciously staying open to new ideas. Third, when creativity does not work out, a less favourable outcome in the eyes of the marketer is accepted.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Vragen	Aanvullende vragen of instructies
<i>1. Demografische vragen</i>	
1. Wat is je leeftijd?	
2. Hoe lang werk je als social media marketeer?	
3. Wat is jouw expertise als social media marketeer?	Wat zijn belangrijke taken voor jou als social media marketeer?
4. Welke opleiding(en) heb je gevolgd?	
<i>2. Content creatie</i>	
5. Kan je mij vertellen hoe jouw content creatie proces eruitziet?	
6. Hoe kom je meestal tot ideeën voor social media content?	
<i>3. Creativiteit</i>	
7. Hoe zou jij creativiteit omschrijven? <i>Definitie scriptie: Creativiteit is de interactie tussen aanleg, proces en omgeving waardoor een individu of groep een waarneembaar product produceert dat zowel nieuw als nuttig is binnen een bepaalde context.</i>	<i>Maak gebruik van de postcard.</i>
8. Op welke manier speelt creativiteit een rol in het content creatie proces?	
9. Hoe wordt jouw creativiteit getriggerd?	Is dit op een bepaald moment tijdens het proces? Wat ging eraan vooraf? Waardoor denk je dat je getriggerd werd?
<i>4. Beperkingen op creativiteit</i>	
10. Op welke manier wordt creativiteit beperkt tijdens content creatie voor social media?	Waar komen deze uitdagingen vandaan? <i>Maak gebruik van het notebook</i>

11a. In hoeverre wordt creativiteit beperkt door beperkte middelen?	Welke middelen beperken de creativiteit? Kan je hiervan voorbeelden geven?
11b. In hoeverre wordt creativiteit beperkt door regels en routines binnen het bedrijf op het proces?	Welke regels zijn er tijdens het brainstormen of creëren van content? Kan je hiervan voorbeelden geven?
11c. In hoeverre wordt creativiteit beperkt door vereisten aan de uitkomst?	Welke vereisten zitten er aan de uitkomst? Kan je hiervan voorbeelden geven?
12. Welke beperking (input, proces of output) heeft de meeste invloed op creativiteit?	Waarom? <i>Maak gebruik van de percentages. Vergelijk dit met het notebook en de gegeven voorbeelden tijdens het interview.</i>
13. In hoeverre ben je jezelf bewust van deze beperkingen?	<i>Confronteer de deelnemer als er veel verschil zit tussen gegeven voorbeelden tijdens het interview en in het notebook met de percentages.</i>
14. Wat zijn de nadelen van deze beperkingen?	Hoe ga je hiermee om? Waar liggen kansen om alsnog creatieve content te maken?
15. Wat zijn de voordelen van deze beperkingen?	Zorgen de beperkingen ervoor dat je met een creatieve oplossing moet komen?
16. Zit er, naar jouw idee, verschil in de beperkingen voor social media ten opzichte van andere platformen?	In vergelijking met tv, radio, tijdschriften of nieuwsbrieven?
5. Kansen voor creativiteit	
17. Waar denk jij dat er kansen liggen om meer ruimte te creëren voor creativiteit ondanks de beperkingen?	
18. Maken jullie al optimaal gebruik van deze kansen?	Indien ja, op welke manier? Indien nee, wat zou er nog beter kunnen? Wat houdt jullie nu nog tegen?

19. Denk je dat er in de toekomst nieuwe kansen kunnen ontstaan?	Waarom wel of waarom niet? Hoe ontstaan die kansen?
20. Is er nog iets anders wat je kwijt wilt over de beperkingen op creativiteit binnen jouw vakgebied?	Is er iets wat nog niet aan bod is gekomen?

