Looking for Art in a Sea of Content: A Human-Centered Approach to Supporting Creativity on Social Media

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Is 'art' simply 'content' in the age of social media? What does art's creation, appreciation, and experience lose when art becomes content? This exploratory research employs a mixed methods approach encompassing interviews, co-design, and stakeholder reviews to critically examine the perceptions of artists, curators, and content creators regarding the distinction between 'art' and 'content.' Our participants reveal four characteristics essential for art experiences that we use to co-design new digital 'content' environments. The work concludes with content creators reviewing the characteristics and designs, offering their thoughts on the feasibility and potential future for 'art' on social media. We offer open-source access to all design and research materials. By exploring the divide between 'art' and 'content,' this research contributes insights and guidelines for developing alternative algorithmic experiences to support creativity on social media.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → *Empirical studies in HCI*.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: art, social media, co-design, algorithmic experience, prototyping, creativity

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1 Introduction

With 4.9 billion users, social media platforms have firmly entrenched themselves as hubs for human connections [94]. Within the past five years, short-form video social media platforms have claimed a major stake of the user numbers. Simultaneously, the term *content* has evolved to encompass nearly all forms of creative expression in the era of social media, blurring the lines between previously distinct artistic industries like film, music, creative writing, photography, and design [65]. As artworks are predominantly encountered in digital formats, often mediated by algorithm-driven social media, it is not surprising that we refer to them as *content* within the context of the *content* recommendation algorithms governing these digital channels [12]. An inability to distinguish types of *content* creates demonstrable drawbacks such as misinformation and exploitation [68, 74]. When legitimate and false news articles are treated the same by social media platforms, they can

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misinform the public [8]. Therefore, since *art* is used to define ourselves and society, we must consider the impact of it becoming lost in *content* [90].

In response to the drawbacks, human-computer interaction (HCI) researchers have called for teasing apart the term *content* to reintroduce specificity when exploring particular areas of human expression online [79]. In our exploratory research, we question whether the medium really is the message [63] or whether *art* can be disentangled from social media. We want to understand how *art* distinguishes itself from ubiquitous *content* and whether the current modes of experiencing creative works (Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok) diminish *art*'s potential significance. Additionally, we question whether artists identifying as "content creators" can benefit from separating their work from the attention-driven industries that often promote them.

This paper uses short-form social media (SFSM) to describe platforms like Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, and TikTok, focusing on short-form video *content*. In this paper, *art* is defined as visual arts, a category of art including fine art (i.e. painting, illustration, sculpture) and contemporary art (i.e. collage, photography, assemblage, land art) [2], allowing us to draw insights from established institutions (galleries and museums) that use experts to differentiate artworks from other human-made artifacts. Previous studies concerning social media, have highlighted how the demand for "Instagrammable" art shapes artists' creations [48, 59, 60]. This research argues that artists tailor their work to suit the algorithms powering social media platforms. Additionally, HCI research has predominantly explored content creators' creative experiences in light of recent developments in AI and algorithmic recommendations [38, 78, 79]. Our research introduces a focus on audiences' **perception** of creative *content*.

Our paper aims to uncover how the social media experience, especially short-form video, might overlook or alter the reception of *art* as a distinct form of *content*. Users' engagement with social media is a part of the Algorithmic Experience (AX) [10], and this study explores the required AX to differentiate *art* from the vast *content* landscape better.

Our inquiry explores key questions:

> **RQ1 -** What characteristics do artists and curators use to differentiate *art* from *content* when both are presented on social media?
> **RQ2 -** When considering the characteristics separating *art* from *content*, how would curators alter the design elements of social media?
> **RQ3 -** How do content creators perceive these altered design elements?

In this paper, we employ a mixed-methods approach deriving methods from research through design [41, 99]. Our pre-study, including interviews (n=18) and a survey (n=37) with curators, artists, and social media users, aimed to comprehend their current experiences and perceptions of encountering *art* within social media *content*. The findings revealed common perspectives that depth, conversations, connections, and time are essential characteristics of experiencing *art*. These characteristics align with the fundamental principles of Slow Technology, emphasizing implicit slowness and temporal interconnectedness [46, 66]. Slow Technology explores redesigning everyday interactions based on specific attributes around time and temporality, facilitating user reflection on experiences and actions.

The main study starts with co-design workshops with curators (n=13), which envisioned experimental digital experiences focusing on *art* rather than encompassing all *content* types. Like algorithms, curators decide what goes on display for audiences and dictate its presentation. These workshops generated low-fidelity wireframes that were cross-examined and iterated upon, resulting in refined interfaces. The interfaces presented a piece of *art* alongside a depth of textual and audiovisual information without insisting the user quickly scroll away allowing for greater time to view and reflect on the *art*.

Subsequently, a stakeholder review with content creators (n=10), henceforth referred to as "creatives" aligning with other HCI literature [23, 78], provided feedback on the co-design materials. This feedback highlighted creatives' struggle to balance meaningful *art* creation with appeasing algorithmic metrics affecting their livelihoods.

In conclusion, this paper offers unique insights into SFSM's impact on user perceptions, especially regarding *art* and creative work. It also provides open-source materials for researchers and designers collaborating with curators to redesign digital *art* experiences (see [89]). Ultimately, we will discuss how our research provides practical examples of design recommendations set forth by other HCI researchers.

2 Related Works

2.1 Short-Form Video Social Media

Today, short-form video *content* dominates modern social media. Short-form video, a format initially popularized by Vine in 2013 later achieved massive success through the merger of Musical.ly and Douyin, forming TikTok in the USA [16, 51, 88]. TikTok's popularity prompted Western competitors like Meta's Instagram and Google's YouTube to introduce Reels and Shorts, creating their versions of the endless feed of short video *content* [51]. This paper's social media references pertain specifically to these platforms and user experiences.

In addition to serving as social spaces, SFSM platforms position themselves as hubs of creativity [101]. This aligns with the concept of algorithmic recommendation systems as "cultural infomediaries," a contemporary iteration of Bourdieu's "cultural intermediaries" [17, 64]. While Bourdieu referred to traditional institutions like human-led museums, Morris's "infomediaries" encompass all information shared with audiences through algorithmic decisions. Examples of *art* infomediaries include Colossal[1] and Europeana[2], connecting audiences with information and framing cultural artifacts. HCI and critical media literature explore how social media platforms' branding and interface design stimulate user-generated content (UGC) by encouraging people to create in response to the *content* they consume [31, 87]. Recent research in HCI and computational aesthetics highlights concerns about the impact of social media, particularly Instagram, on artists' modes of expression [48, 59, 60]. Artists adapt their work to align with the perceived standards of trending UGC on Instagram and other social media platforms [25]. Similarly, other artists heavily embrace technological advances like AI and algorithms to elevate their *art* into new creative forms [7, 19].

While the overt focus of HCI research is on providing a digital space to foster creativity, research indicates that creatives are spending fewer labor hours on their artistic craft and instead are spending more hours on other forms of labor such as marketing and promotion to appease the algorithm [24]. De and Lu dub this phenomenon "algorithmically mediated creative labor (AMCL)" [25], and there are some researchers in the HCI community coming up with AI solutions to alleviate the additional labor [52]. Users understand an algorithm recommends *content* to other users, and success requires emulating trending items [26, 27, 76, 86]. Despite platforms claiming to promote creativity, researchers argue they foster a memetic communication style that relies on replicating and remixing existing *content* [42, 96, 100]. Such user behavior establishes the problem space this paper shares with other HCI work; the system design around the algorithm eventually shapes user behavior and perceptions.

HCI has a history of investigating and redesigning social media for various social behaviors, involving multiple stakeholders directly [9]. Early research aimed to modify social media experiences

[1] https://www.thisiscolossal.com/about/
[2] https://www.europeana.eu/en/about-us

to encourage interest in science or civic participation [6, 75]. Recent work explored redesigning social media with the specific needs of autistic adults in mind [15].

When specifically looking to redesign social media for creativity, researchers examined how the structure and design of social media platforms impact creatives and their ability to produce creative works. This includes exploring how platform structures foster the development of unique ecologies for creators and their followers [58, 98]. Scholars argue that creatives now undertake additional invisible forms of labor essential for survival on the platforms [79]. For example, social media has expanded the roles of individual authors who rely on the platformed Internet for self-publishing and self-advertising creative works [78].

These HCI findings build on the body of work exploring the exploitative nature of social media platforms in general and how invisible, uncompensated labor is necessary for *content* to exist but is never actually compensated for by the systems [39, 40, 54]. Informed by Marxist theories on labor and exploitation, critical media scholars analyze the power dynamics within social media sites [73]. Key areas of focus include unequal compensation for labor within digital social networks and the disproportionate impact on users based on gender and racial classifications in online spaces, altering the creative labor relationship [30, 35, 85].

Even dissenting voices acknowledge the power imbalances disadvantaging creatives within major social media platforms [72, 84]. Critical media studies and HCI research underscore the impact of short-form video *content* platforms, emphasizing the reduction of diverse human expression to the generic label of *content* [79]. Prior calls in the literature highlight the problem but do not often provide steps to separating *art* from *content* with actionable design requirements and prototypes. Therefore, our paper takes early steps to identify requirements that separate *art* from *content* while developing and testing prototypes that effectively employ said requirements.

2.2 The Potential for Designing with Slow Technology

Previous work in HCI has explored the potential for Slow Technology to disrupt the user experience in various situations. The umbrella term of Slow Technology refers to an approach to interaction design that looks beyond the immediate goal of efficient instantaneous technological experiences [46]. While originally focused on temporal digital experiences, the design method has expanded to include other values that allow users to engage with technology in novel ways (see [56, 69, 70] for discussions on other values that society uses to define time). Researchers have developed various experimental prototypes through this research approach and placed them in front of users [66]. These prototypes manipulate the user's previously instantaneous and efficient experiences by injecting slowness and reflection into the tasks of printing their digital photos or listening to the radio, to name a few.

The design approach of Slow Technology rests on three primary facets that were set out in the original work [46, 67]. The three facets focused on (1) reflective technology, which promotes both reflection on the task and on the role of technology overall; (2) time technology, which challenges users' expectations of time; and (3) amplified environments, which work to elevate technology and tasks beyond just meaningless background occurrences [46]. While these facets of Slow Technology have been critiqued, Odom et al. have shown the potential for these facets to be applied in designing new experiences [67]. Specifically, they expanded the facets with their own eight qualities of Slow Technology: implicit slowness, explicit slowness, ongoingness, temporal drift, pre-interaction, temporal modality, temporal interconnectedness, and temporal granularity [67]. As Asadi et al. point out, "current trends of slow technology are more design-led than intended user-led" [13]. In other words, while traditional Slow Technology involves design requirements that are dictated by the researchers and tested on users, we set out to conduct a user centered design approach. Through interviews and co-designs our participants shared their desires for design requirements that altered

how *art* could be experienced in digital spaces. After reflecting on the design requirements and details presented by our participants, we noted the similarities between their specifications and the principles of Slow Technology. Therefore, we provide an example of a user-driven, bottom-up approach to Slow Technology design. Rather than the researchers designing an experience crafted to reflect the goals and qualities of Slow Technology, we argue that participants should direct the designs and critiques of the technology being studied; this is built on through Sections 4.2 and 7.1.

3 Research Overview

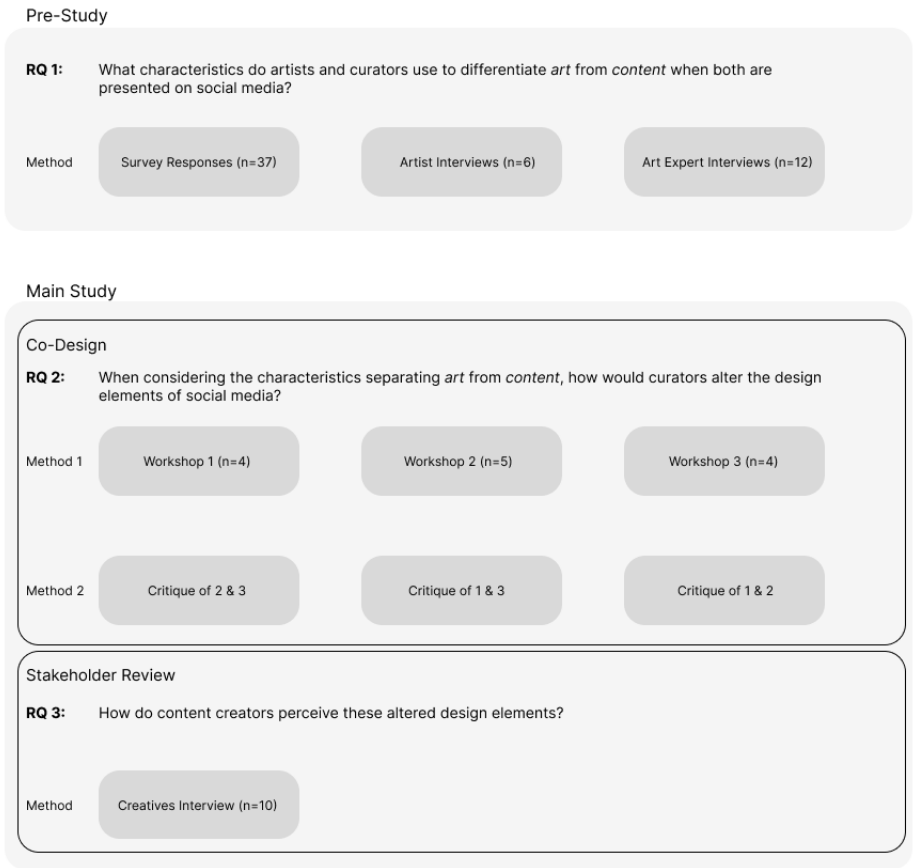

Fig. 1. An overview of this paper's methods and research questions.

This paper employs a mixed-methods approach to address the research questions. The study comprises two parts: the Pre-Study, incorporating interviews and surveys (**RQ1**), and the Main Study, consisting of a co-design section (**RQ2**) and a stakeholder review section (**RQ3**). We obtained institutional ethics approval for both studies. For a comprehensive overview of the methodologies and their integration, refer to Figure 1. We conducted research remotely to enable global participation from curators, artists, and creatives. Video conferencing and automatic transcription tools were employed for efficient note-taking and record-keeping.

The researchers conducting the research represent multiple cultural backgrounds with technical training in the field of HCI with one researcher fully focused on *art* and AI research and another that previously had a professional career as an artist and gallery employee.

4 RQ1: Understanding what sets *art* apart from *content*

4.1 Pre-Study Methods

4.1.1 Participant Recruitment. Experts: By sourcing publicly listed institutional emails, we recruited 12 curators from various US and UK museums and collections. Participants' institutional affiliations were anonymized, with demographic descriptions available in Table 1, identified by code **E** (for expert) followed by a number.

Table 1. This outlines the IDs and Gender of our experts, a short description of their current role, and how many years of experience they have in the art world [4].

ID (Gender)	Role	Years of Experience
E1 (M)	Private gallery curator	12 years
E2 (M)	Academic and historical curator	30 years
E3 (M)	Curator of drawings	20 years
E4 (M)	Collection assistant	8 years
E5 (M)	American visual culture curator	36 years
E6 (F)	Museum digital content manager	10 years
E7 (M)	Museum digital infrastructure and online collections	20 years
E8 (F)	Modern and contemporary art curator	27 years
E9 (F)	European and American art curator	40+ years
E10 (F)	Chinese and East Asian art curator	25 years
E11 (M)	Keeper of antiquities	30 years
E12 (F)	Manager of education and digital resources	12 years

Artists: Accessing artists proved challenging, requiring searching personal websites for contact details and posting recruitment messages with sign-up links to Reddit forums. Ultimately, 6 participants from diverse stylistic backgrounds were recruited via emails gathered from sign-up links, meeting inclusion criteria as artists generating income through fairs and galleries. More details are in Table 2, credited as **A** followed by a number.

SFSM Users: We posted a survey link across Meta, LinkedIn, and Twitter to gauge social media users' opinions, collecting 37 responses over four weeks. Demographic differentiators, primarily focused on their relationship with *art* (Appendix A8), guided data collection. Participants are credited as **P** followed by a number. The convenience sample likely exhibits selection bias toward those with established connections to *art* and technology.

Table 2. This outlines the IDs and Gender for our artists, their preferred medium, and years of experience.

ID (Gender)	Medium	Years of Experience
A1 (F)	Sketching and watercolours	18 years
A2 (M)	Performing arts	8 years
A3 (F)	internet art and machinima	22 years
A4 (F)	Clay sculpting	18 years
A5 (F)	Sculpting with personal technique and materials	26 years
A6 (M)	Painting with acrylics and mixed media	14 years

4.1.2 Study Design. We conducted semi-structured remote interviews via Microsoft Teams, using real-time transcripts for data collection as required by our review board. The transcripts captured all spoken vocal utterances. Typically, two researchers were present: one conducted the study, and the other assisted with notes and observations.

The use of semi-structured interviews in our research is grounded in HCI and research-through-design principles [41, 99]. Established HCI research often begins with interviews and surveys to understand experts' and users' positions within a system [32, 33, 93]. Our study aimed to answer **RQ1** regarding attributes distinguishing *art* from *content* for artists and curators. The interviews cover perception of *art* and art theory, online platform interactions, and opinions about social media, allowing for in-depth exploration via follow-up questions. The interviews ranged 30-60 minutes, scripts can be found at [89].

The online survey, a concise version of the interview [89], took an average of 8.5 minutes to complete, with no follow-ups. The purpose of surveying social media users was to understand to what extent they agreed with the statements of the artists and curators. As the non-specialist end users, they are most directly impacted by the current algorithmic experience of SFSM delivering everything as *content*.

4.1.3 Analysis. The pre-study outputs comprised interview transcripts and text-based survey responses. The analysis combined survey and interview data using anonymous IDs to differentiate participant statements. Transcripts and responses were organized into digital sticky notes on Miro[3], then clustered using the affinity clustering method [47, 83]. This method highlights universal claims and coherent arguments, facilitating the identification of primary positions within unique participant groups. A comparison of prominent positions across all (curators, artists, and social media users) groups led to the final set of attributes distinguishing *art* from *content* based on our participant sample.

4.2 Pre-Study Findings

Our analysis of the pre-study interviews and survey submissions elevated four characteristics considered essential to experiencing and appreciating *art* instead of *content*. In Section 7.1 we highlight how these attributes reflect the facets of Slow Technology [46] offering a novel example of user-generated Slow Technology design requirements dedicated to enhancing *art* experiences for diverse user groups. These four attributes include depth, conversation, connection, and time (see Figure 2 for brief definitions).

4.2.1 Depth. During the pre-study, our curators and artists emphasized the reality of the sheer volume of information associated with a single piece of *art*. Our participants argued the more information available for an artwork, the better chances there were of cultivating audience interest in the work (E7, E2, A1, A4, P(12/37)). The importance of accurate information and the intrinsic value of data as a support tool for enhancing *art* experiences have also been underscored in other HCI literature [55]. Our participants assert that possessing a depth of information is an indispensable aspect of *art* experiences. However, while data surrounding *art* can significantly enhance the overall experience, it must be properly labeled and easily accessible—a current challenge (E12). One issue stems from exclusivity measures, often implemented for safeguarding intellectual property rights (E6), which hinder convenient access to additional *art* information despite the potential to profoundly influence audience appreciation (E2, E10, A3, P(21/37)).

Our participants expressed optimism that digital experiences driven by recommendation algorithms could provide genuine access to *art* information in the face of prevailing institutional

[3]https://miro.com/about/

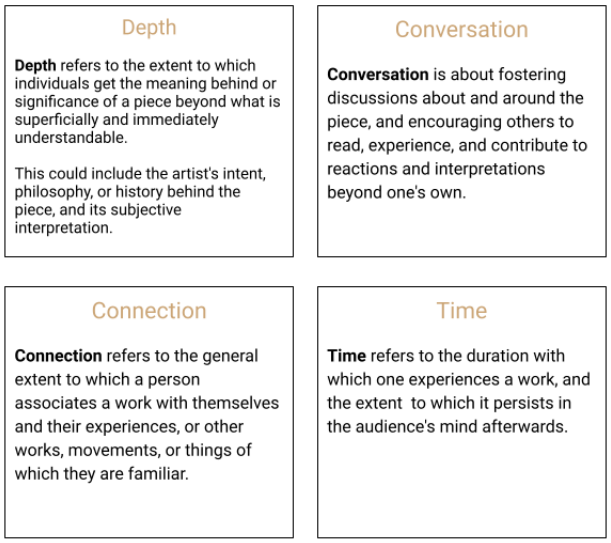

Fig. 2. Working definition of the four characteristics developed by participants in the pre-study.

exclusivity. Nevertheless, algorithmic support and the organization of *art* information require accurate labeling and digitization "to really access the breadth of artistic heritage" (E3), another challenge faced by professionals within cultural institutions (E5, E1, E12, E8).

Our participants and HCI researchers agree that proper information categorization will improve *art* experiences. However, effectively communicating this information is essential to avoid overwhelming audiences with unstructured data, as may be the case in social media [55].

4.2.2 Conversation. Our pre-study participants reiterated the importance of conversation and communication regarding the depth of additional information available for each piece of *art*. According to the participants, having facts about an artwork is essential to understanding it, but leaving room for discussions and reflections is key to appreciating the artwork. One participant noted a struggle with "how can we let those opinions coexist along [with] the known facts" (E7).

This viewpoint finds support in other HCI literature, reinforcing our participants' argument for the necessity of solutions that integrate both the depth of factual information and the diverse perspectives of various stakeholders [97]. Participants reflected on how the depth of information and conversations may shape and inform the interpretations and discussions among audience members (E4, E8, E9, A2-6, P(14/37)). As they discussed the benefits of communication and conversations for audiences, they also considered how museums and other cultural institutions need to adapt their communication styles for more effective information dissemination (E6, E9, E12) [29, 37, 77].

According to both the literature and our participants, effective conversations about *art* hinge on respecting and contextualizing the diverse perspectives of various stakeholders in relation to a single piece. However, these conversations rarely occur in isolation, underscoring the importance of the third attribute: connection.

4.2.3 Connection. The significance of establishing the context and network power of a piece of *art* was a recurring theme among our curators, artists, and other participants. They emphasized

that a work of *art* connects to other pieces and fosters connections among individuals. Participants wanted to leverage technology to make these connections more evident to audiences (E6, P(10/37)).

This desire for technological support aligns with existing literature that underscores the role of *art* and creative practices in sensemaking and identity formation [23, 79]. Using art appreciation as a means to reflect on themselves and society allows audiences to develop their own interpretations of their lived experiences. Participants noted a growing trend of audience members explicitly seeking *art* in which they can see themselves (E9, E12, E6, A4, A1, A3).

As audiences discover *art* and artists they relate to, they cultivate new experiences and relationships with *art*. HCI research also highlights that *art* experiences are inherently social, as access to *art* is facilitated through connections with and responses to other audience members [55]. Our participants support this claim, recognizing that audiences can establish their own artistic tastes and identities in relation to society's standards.

> "I think people are more comfortable walking in and looking for something that is appealing specifically to them, that meets their needs and their tastes rather than wanting to feel comfortable in recognizing something that society says is important or is part of the traditional cannon." - E10

The context within which audiences view *art* is considered vital by curators and other curators. A piece of *art* is rarely an isolated entity; it possesses social connections linking individual audience members and cultural connections to other artworks within the broader *art* world canon.

4.2.4 Time. The final attribute described by our participants as an essential aspect of viewing visual *art* is intentionally taking the time to do so. In many ways, the preceding attributes—depth, conversation, and connection—rely on the audience dedicating a certain amount of time to engage with the *art*. As our participants put it, discerning "good" *art* necessitates the ability of the audience member to pause and truly observe (E6, E11, E1, A4, A5, P(25/37)).

Unfortunately, time to stop and look is not inherently built into the technical infrastructure of short-form video *content* social media platforms. Critical media literature has argued how these platforms streamline production and engagement [16, 101]. Each piece of *content* on these platforms swiftly leads to another by encouraging viewers to remix or recreate existing trends or automatically transition to the next video in the endless scroll [24]. Well-designed digital tools that enable users to view and explore *art* in a manner that incorporates the previous key elements instead of scrolling through an endless array of *content* can enhance and support the user experience of appreciating *art* (A1, A6, P(16/37)).

One participant exemplified the potential of digital tools by referencing Jason Farago's detailed *art* analysis for The New York Times [34], stating, "But if you sort of spend the time as he does to take that image and to really use digital tools to move beyond just the representation. . . then you can really do something positive and get people engaged" (E5). According to the participants, there is value in these tools to positively impact digital experiences of *art* appreciation. The challenge, however, lies in consistently making these tools accessible to wider audiences (E8).

With an environment rife with changes, there exists an opportunity for HCI researchers to glean valuable insights directly from curators on how digital experiences can be adapted to incorporate these four attributes and enhance the appreciation of *art*.

5 RQ2: How would curators alter the social media experience

5.1 Main Study Part 1: Methods

5.1.1 Participant Recruitment. A selection of curators, gallerists, and art collection specialists (n=13) were contacted for co-design workshops, primarily recruited through direct email networking as in

Section 4.1.1. Some participants (n=6) from Section 4.1.1 were approached again, adhering to ethics approval, considering the time gap between the Pre-Study and Main Study and the distinct methods used. As the focus of this paper explores separating *art* from *content* on SFSM, our curators can offer their expertise at selecting and presenting *art* to audiences both in traditional gallery settings and online for their digital collections and social media. The very nature of their work as curators involves reviewing and presenting *art* to audiences.

The collaborative co-design sessions provided a platform for multiple experts to work and discuss. We compensated participants by offering co-authorship on publicly released open-source materials (see [89]), deemed more appropriate compensation than e-gift cards by our institution's ethics committee.

5.1.2 Study Design. Participants were divided into three co-design groups. Co-design workshops allow HCI researchers to glean insights into participants' varied perspectives on the same prompts and collaborate to generate artifacts and research findings [53, 81]. For this paper, the researchers observed how curators with extensive experience in analog, physical *art* experiences approached the research prompt of redesigning digital *art* experiences. Each 2-hour session involved two researchers, one as a facilitator and the other as a note-taker, and comprised four activities with brief discussions following each.

The first activity involved participants producing and ranking behaviors within daily curatorial tasks inspired by radar design activities in workshopping literature [3, 47]. Participants acclimated to the whiteboarding tool and expressed their daily challenges. The second activity had participants map potential solutions for online platforms to each of the four design implications from Section 4.2, drawing from creativity matrix activities [1, 49]. The third activity had participants develop "Do's" and "Don'ts" based on previous exercises to differentiate artworks from the generic *content* label. The final workshop exercise instructs participants to translate the "Do's" and "Don'ts" of exercise three into UI elements on low-fidelity wireframes [62]. For example, "Do provide insight into the creation process" became a video UI element of the artist making the work. Similarly, "Do support the opportunity for additional learning" became linked text elements that users could click on to learn more. Due to some participants' unfamiliarity with the online whiteboard tool, researchers acted as hands, creating wireframes based on expert discussions. Materials can be found at [89].

Before the workshops with participants, researchers conducted a cognitive walkthrough and a pilot workshop. A cognitive walkthrough involves an expert's external, informed review of design decisions' potential impact on the user experience [91, 95]. A gallerist with expertise in private and national galleries conducted the cognitive walkthrough. The pilot workshop, involving HCI researchers within the group, focused on practical aspects of workshop design, the whiteboard tool, and exercises. Final adjustments were made based on feedback from these preparatory sessions before the co-design workshops.

5.1.3 Analysis. The analysis of the co-design materials was a cross-examination of the outputs by the workshop groups. Following the co-design sessions, the participants received the designs created in the sessions they did not attend and a critique form they had to complete (refer back to Method 2 in Figure 1). Once the participants returned the critiques, the researchers conducted a "walk the wall" activity [20, 50], placing critiques on appropriate areas of the low-fidelity prototypes. This method, standard in design sessions, directly incorporates critique and feedback to the designs [20, 50]. Iterating based on critiques and initial workshop outputs, researchers produced a final set of interfaces. This approach allows expert participants and researchers to make parallel prototypes and rapidly iterate over potential designs before testing and validation, avoiding commitment to building an expensive system.

Fig. 3. An example screen designed by the first workshop cohort.

5.2 Main Study Part 1: Co-Design Outputs

Building upon the four attributes of depth, conversation, connection, and time derived from the transcripts of the pre-study, the co-design sessions integrated these attributes into the participatory design exercises involving curators.

5.2.1 Screens. Each co-design workshop yielded a low-fidelity prototype collaboratively designed by the participants and visualized by the researchers. While participants frequently discussed the limitations of experiencing *art* on SFSM platforms, the outcomes of the prototypes were more focused on creating early designs for a distinct digital experience explicitly tailored to *art*, diverging from the concept of redesigning short-form video *content* on these platforms. The resulting screens do not reflect the usual features of SFSM, a looping video, and an endless scroll; instead, these are new digital prototypes, a testament to the curators' shared perspective on how *art* should be displayed digitally, discussed in detail in Section 7.2.

Screens 1. The curators of this workshop were motivated to elevate proper formal curatorial data and information related to a piece of *art* (Figure 3), aligning closely with the depth attribute of the pre-study findings. This is evident in the heavy emphasis on the text sections. Another important design feature the participants included was access to external resources and links to other materials (see the underlined artist name and artist process video). Finally, there was a desire to connect back to the physical exhibition space with a link to get tickets.

Screens 2. This workshop group similarly prioritized the depth attribute, providing users with a wealth of information (Figure 4). Furthermore, they took a distinct approach by explicitly describing and implementing a specific type of user interaction: sliders. Like recent research on recommendation system designs seen at CHI 2023, sliders and dials offer users greater agency in their *art* experience [38]. Participants in this workshop described how sliders could enable users to select the *art* they want to learn more about and take action to pause exploration and delve deeper into the details. Through this interaction, there are connections back to the prestudy's depth and time attributes.

Fig. 4. An example screen designed by the second workshop cohort.

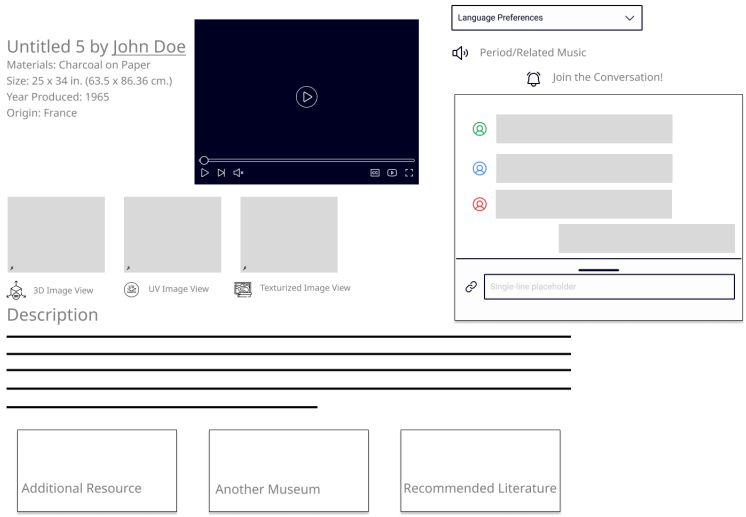

Fig. 5. An example screen designed by the third workshop cohort.

Screens 3. During the workshop session, it became clear that members of this group had more social media experience, which may have influenced their design choices. During the prototype design, they focused on fostering connection by centering a video exploration of the artwork as it stands in the exhibit (Figure 5), connecting and situating the artwork to the broader museum or gallery collection. Additional interface features such as relevant cultural music, multiple language settings, and a general chatbox also open up paths for users to connect with each other and the *art*

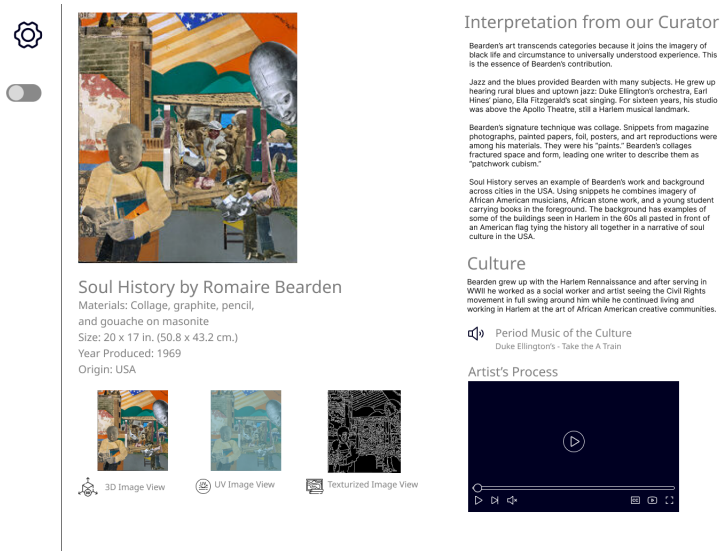

Fig. 6. A higher fidelity screen shown to the creatives for their review, image and text drawn from [5, 18, 82].

satisfying the conversation characteristic. These features explicitly promote discussion and a social experience of *art* appreciation.

5.2.2 Similarities, Critiques, and Iterations. As outlined within the methods, the outputs of the co-design workshops were cross-examined by the participants. Based on their critiques, a "walk the wall" activity [20, 50] allowed the researchers to reflect on the interface features broadly accepted across the participant groups.

Participants immediately noted common values, such as making the artwork central to the experience and supporting it with in-depth factual information. They also observed key differences, particularly in the potential modes of interaction. For instance, one prototype featured sliders for customizing the user experience, while another included a dedicated comment section for discussions about the artwork.

Common feedback regarding the prototypes centered on the desire for more informal language in the text section labels. The current word choice was considered too formal for the general user interested in exploring *art*. Furthermore, many comments emphasized prioritizing visual components over text sections. That being said, the more informational background artists and creatives offered regarding their individual pieces, the more likely they were to stand out from other *content* typically found on social media. Participants valued higher user agency.

Based on these critiques, the researchers worked to develop a set of medium fidelity screens (see Figure 6 for one such screen). These screens are not complete prototypes but rather early designs functioning as vignettes representing the feedback obtained from curators, taken to a more advanced level within the methodological approach of research through design [99]. While these screens are to be reviewed and validated by the creatives in the second part of the study, they aim to meet some of the design implications and recommendations outlined in HCI literature, which will be discussed in Section 7.2.

6 RQ3: Reviewing designs with content creatives

6.1 Main Study Part 2: Methods

6.1.1 Participant Recruitment. We recruited ten professional content creators, aged 18 and above, with established social media accounts on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube. While they communicated with the researchers in English, they are a global sample working in various cultures and languages. To reiterate, these participants are referred to as "creatives" in this paper, aligning with other HCI research to separate the participants from the word *content*[23, 78]. The selected reviewers, detailed in Table 3, will be referenced by their ID code in this paper. Their account names and profile links were included as advertising compensation, as our institutional ethics committee advised, in exchange for their participation.

Table 3. Details regarding the creatives we recruited and interviewed for the final part of the study.

ID	Account Name	Social Media	Subject Area	Subscriber/Follower
C1	Alice Cappelle	YouTube/Instagram	Video Essays	319k/25.3k
C2	The Canvas	YouTube/Instagram	Art Critique	441k/3k
C3	Alpay Efe	YouTube/Instagram	Painting	658k/466k
C4	Eirik Arnesen	YouTube/Instagram	Sculpture	29.6k/98.6k
C5	J.R.R. Talkin'	YouTube	Television Critique	4.86k
C6	Uncomfy	YouTube/Instagram/TikTok	Art and Creativity	128k/109k
C7	Shuen Art	YouTube/Instagram/TikTok	Digital Art	33.4k/90.7k
C8	danielsonwilliams_	YouTube/Instagram	Music/Cooking/Cannabis	27.9k/2.4M
C9	NIRO	YouTube/Instagram	Digital Art	82.8k/3.5k
C10	Kenn Yap	YouTube/Instagram	Concept Art	200k/37.8k

6.1.2 Study Design. We conducted a stakeholder review with social media creators [89]. This review, akin to a user test, goes beyond usability to gather perspectives from those impacted by the research [43]. The goal was to determine whether the perspectives and assumptions of curators and artists provided creatives with an effective approach to elevate *art* from the sea of *content*. The first 30 minutes focused on the results of Section 4.2, exploring overlaps and differences between curators' key characteristics of *art* (Figure 2) and the reality for modern social media creatives.

During this initial stage, participants used Likert scales featuring synonyms and antonyms of the curators' key characteristics to rate their own social media posts. For example, "Are your posts meant to be delivered faster or slower?" to better understand their current position on the Time characteristic, one of the four attributes derived from the pre-study in Section 4.2.

The latter half centered on reviewing prototypes from Section 5.2. Creatives interacted with the prototypes, providing immediate feedback while researchers collected responses and posed relevant questions. This aimed to understand their perspective on a new digital experience within platformed social media and short-form video *content*.

6.1.3 Analysis. The main outputs were interview transcripts, analyzed using the affinity diagramming system described in Section 4.1.3. Participants also recorded value selections on a Likert scale, with the researchers plotting the numbers on a chart. Reflections on creatives' feedback regarding the redesigns were derived from the affinity diagram ideas, concepts, and the Likert scale chart.

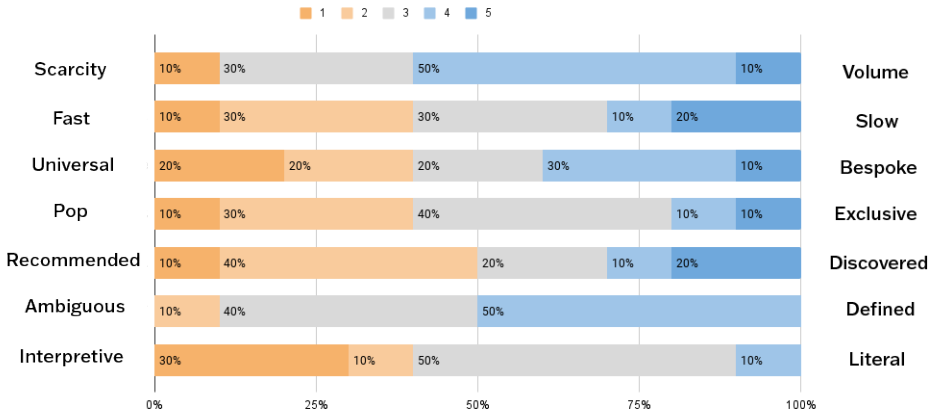

Fig. 7. Results of the Likert Scale questions posed during the stakeholder review. A selection of 1 is closer to the value on the left, while a 5 is closer to the value on the right. For example, 60% of our creators prefer volume over scarcity.

6.2 Main Study Part 2: Stakeholder Review

To validate and contextualize the work done in collaboration with our curators, we presented the workshop outputs to creatives who were professionally established on social media platforms. Through the stakeholder review, we can present their thoughts on the values and screens.

6.2.1 Values and Characteristics Review. The stakeholder review began with a discussion of the findings from Section 4.2.

Participants described their struggle to balance personal cultural values—such as creativity, discourse, and uniqueness—with the values incentivized by social media platforms (C1-3, C5-7). Their responses highlighted a disconnect between the intrinsic values shared with their audiences (like self-expression, ideas, and cultural understanding) and the financial priorities of social media platforms, which are often driven by advertising revenue.

With these insights, we transitioned to the next phase of the review, presenting participants with a series of synonyms and antonyms related to the four attributes identified by the curators. In the Likert scale section (Figure 7), we identified the attributes that creatives preferred to embody in their own social media work. Our creatives consistently value fast delivery of their creative *content* (40%). This need for speed was associated with producing *content* rapidly to stay relevant and avoid falling victim to "the algorithm" (C1, C4, C6). Similarly, the creatives felt the need to provide more pop (i.e., pop *art* or popular *content*) and avoid information that is quite exclusive (40%). While they enjoyed making more exclusive *content*, those particular posts tended to underperform (C1-2). 50% of participants preferred their *content* being algorithmically recommended rather than organically discovered via word of mouth. All participants distinguished between the two, with word-of-mouth audiences typically resembling their existing audience, while recommended audiences represented new growth and expansion opportunities.

For the contrasting values, the creatives' opinions diverged on whether their work should cater to a universal audience or remain tailored to a specific population. Those who selected closer to universal said it was part of their creative "philosophy" (C3) to make the work as open and available to anyone as possible. Those who selected closer to bespoke said that over time, they got

comfortable with their own "voice" (C1) and creative work, leading to a dedicated "community" around said work.

The final two value pairs of the Likert scale offered an interesting juxtaposition of ideas. While 50% of our creatives preferred to create work well-defined within their own creative vision and aligned with their agenda, 40% preferred their audience to perceive the work as interpretable rather than literal. Our participants noted a balance between defined creative work made to target trends in the algorithm while still allowing room for audience interpretation (C2, C4-10).

Our creatives were apprehensive when asked to reflect on the characteristics of *art* experiences drawn from the curators and artists. They acknowledged the importance of the characteristics but highlighted the challenges they face in adhering to them (C1-10).

> "Social media doesn't care about these at all, no. It's the people that care. That's the sad part. " - C7

The responses indicate that our previous participants' responses are commendable but aspirational within the current social media landscape and the incentive structures driving creative work. The two characteristics that posed the greatest concern were "conversation" and "time." According to our participants, the structure of social media platforms does not foster these values. In fact, they argued that there is no expectation of meaningful conversations or time while online. Creatives argue that while social media platforms claim to connect people and offer comment sections that allow users to interact with the creatives, these are never truly seen as meaningful conversations (C2, C4, C9). At times, these comments are never even expecting a response. Similarly, creatives argue that the popularity of short-form video formats in social media does not afford users time to engage deeply with creative work (C2-4, C7-10).

6.2.2 Screen Review. When the creatives were presented with the screens as vignettes, offering a glimpse of a potential future interface aligned with the identified characteristics, their feedback primarily reflected a mix of excitement and apprehension. While enthusiastic, they expressed concerns that audiences might not share the same level of interest and may not engage with the envisioned experience. The participants felt that the screens exhibited an extreme approach to identifying and supporting creative work (C4-8). Treating creative works like fine *art*, as recognized by our curators, and prioritizing the attributes of depth, conversation, connection, and time could alienate casual viewers exploring social media (C3, C6). Balancing our curators' four key values with the platforms' realities will be a notable challenge in future design work.

Several participants noted these vignettes prompted reflection on the challenges of cultivating two types of online audiences within social media (C3-4, C6-8). One audience seeks and appreciates "long-form content," while the other consumes and shares "short-form content," almost akin to broadcasted advertisements. The screens from the co-design and curators would interest the dedicated long-form audience, applying the characteristics and offering experiences that would elevate the creative work and have a meaningful impact. However, creatives faced the dilemma of surviving in the short-form *content*-dominated landscape that has become prevalent across all social media platforms (C1, C4, C10). Recognizing this pain point, we prompted them to articulate their needs and aspirations for the digital environment.

When asked to reimagine the digital environment in alignment with their values and based on their recent exposure during the review, the creatives proposed two approaches. First, they wanted transparency on how the goals and aspirations of creatives can extend beyond merely meeting engagement metric targets. Second, they want a platform that does not succumb to the prevailing trend of short-form *content*, allowing them to grow and develop a community around "valuable creative work" (C2-5).

Recognizing the challenge of presenting creative works on a platform primarily funded by advertiser revenue, our creatives acknowledge the tension between the aspirational values of the "art world" [4] and the current economic realities of contemporary creative livelihoods. Overall, there is concern among our participants that re-configuring social media is challenging as it feels too big to fail, often being compared with the concept of capitalism (C2). Therefore, any designer or engineer seeking to address this issue should be mindful of how non-financial and capitalistic values can coexist to potentially formulate a solution. Creatives found the endless scroll and focus on copying and pasting trending sounds to be particularly against their own creative philosophies and workflows (C3, C7). The short-form video *content* format popularized by TikTok has been copied by other platforms, which concerns our participants.

As our creatives note, their preferred methods of social media presence are being shaped by a growing "homogeneity" in the digital space where every major platform converges on the most lucrative advertising setup possible (C1, C4). The stakeholder review results indicated that approaching a social media redesign with the aim of elevating *art* above mere *content* directly challenges the financial structure of platforms and their relationship with creative professionals. From here, researchers can consider how to pair alternative design methods with research through design to explore potential prototypes that further challenge the financial power structure dictating the creative works shared on social media.

7 Discussion

Our findings address the research questions posed in this study. Participants highlighted depth, connection, conversation, and time as crucial attributes distinguishing *art* from *content* (**RQ1**). These align with Slow Technology principles, advocating for a bottom-up approach and integrating Slow Technology in the context of *art* on social media, which we discuss further in Section 7.1.

Addressing how these attributes could redesign social media with insights from curators (**RQ2**), workshops yielded prototypes for dedicated *art* experiences. Section 7.2 reviews the cross-examination and final designs, referencing related HCI work on creative *content* displayed on social media.

To evaluate the design materials, we presented them to creatives (**RQ3**). Section 7.3 explores how creatives' comments align with the Pre-Study feedback, highlighting concerns about algorithmically powered platforms as exploitative for creative work. Ultimately, the first two study parts and research questions provide us with attributes and designs that, when evaluated, reveal how approaches to separating *art* from *content* hold up within the current reality of platform power.

7.1 Users Demand Slower Art Experiences

Section 2.2 defined Slow Technology as an experiential design approach focusing on temporal aspects [46, 67]. We then present the results of our user-centered research including the attributes our participants described as essential for *art* experiences: (1) depth of information, (2) space for meaningful audience conversations, (3) audience-artwork connections, and (4) time for the experience are essential characteristics of experiencing *art*. We argue that these recommendations follow the established design philosophy of Slow Technology.

The identified characteristics align with qualities promoting implicit slowness and temporal interconnectedness [67], contributing to reflective technology. This empowers users to reflect on the encountered *content* and discern whether it qualifies as *art* or not [46, 67]. However, current social media structures do not naturally foster these attributes or the *art* they represent, necessitating a shift in the user experience.

Our creative participants endorsed these attributes but noted challenges tied to the power dynamics and financial incentives of current social media platforms, especially regarding time. Many advocate for long-form communities (e.g., Twitch [36, 92] or Podcasts [44, 61]) that would

engage more meaningfully with creative work across these four attributes, aligning with findings in Intangible Cultural Heritage research on vlogging and live-streaming for cultural preservation [21, 57]. As Asadi et al. argue, design should prioritize "the user's desire to interact with technology," rather than enforcing designer-led constraints [13]. Accordingly, our participants advocate resisting the short-form *content* emphasis favored by current platforms.

Given participants' emphasis on time, any redesign should prioritize the temporal dimensions of digital creative experiences. This approach aligns with Slow Technology's aim to offer varied temporal experiences that reduce constant interaction demands [46, 67].

Combining insights from our co-design participants with feedback from creatives, we urge future work to establish "amplified environments" [46, 67] to ensure the generic label of *content* does not consume individual creative works, even if that results in designs that do not reflect expectations of SFSM. We advocate extending this approach to other scenarios combating the universal label of *content*, using user research and prototypes to develop effective interventions aligned with Slow Technology values.

7.2 Designing for the Digital Presentation of Art

Section 5.2 leveraged feedback from Section 4.2 to engage curators in reimagining an *art*-focused social media platform (**RQ2**). While numerous digital spaces market themselves as bastions of creativity and *art*, they can still learn from the perspectives of the creatives and curators. This paper unveils outcomes from three co-design sessions reshaping online *art* encounters by rejecting the established design features of SFSM, creating a wholly new digital experience.

Drawing on design recommendations from recent HCI research, outlined in Section 2.1, we can reflect on the design outputs of our co-designs. Researchers argue the experience of social media algorithms diverts the creatives' focus from their actual creative work towards gaming the algorithm [23]. Therefore, the curators designed the screens to put creative work as the primary focal point. The figures illustrate this focus (Figures 3, 4, & 5), placing artwork images at the center with information tailored to each piece.

Our curators urged creatives to highlight the labor, effort, and process that went into a single piece of creative work on the screens. The final screens' information layout reflects our curators' characteristics. These layouts aim to respond to the call for digital spaces to embody "post-capitalistic values" [78]. Sharma et al. and our experts argue that artists are expected to be marketers, social media influencers, and data analysts in addition to their actual work. The screens, focusing on one artwork at a time and showcasing details about the creative process, intend to make the invisible labor more visible [78].

The co-design screens also align with three recommendations by Simpson and Semaan: Uncoupling metrics from creative success, more malleable structure, and limiting objectification [79]. These screens eliminate traditional engagement metrics, offer diverse formats for presenting *art*, and prioritize the depth of a single piece over a demanding posting schedule (Figure 6). By addressing Simpson and Semaan's recommendations, the screens allow artists to focus on developing their work and avoid becoming subservient to a grueling posting schedule.

Reviewing the co-design screens through the lens of previous HCI research underscores the necessity for digital *art* spaces to challenge social media's AX norms to create new digital environments [22]. Historically, *art* delivery has taken varied, non-formal routes via magazines and collectives to reject institutional control of museums and academies [28, 42, 71, 80]. Therefore, to foster community and connection, designers should expand on the semi-flexible architectures of our curators' screens that empower artists rather than mimicking traditional social media or museum websites.

While finalizing the immediate interface or algorithmic experience, it is increasingly pertinent to question how our digital spaces and algorithmic experiences shape our ideas and perceptions based on the information they present.

7.3 The Patron Power of Social Media

We have established four attributes differentiating *art* from *content* (Section 4.2) and presented designs in Section 5.2, calling for redesigning social media from curators and artists. Section 6.2 offers a reality check from creatives who acknowledge subscribing to the values and ideas of our earlier participants (**RQ3**). However, they contend that social media platforms are not easily transformed into objective exhibition spaces and no longer function as the cultural "inter/infomediaries" [17, 64] previously described.

Feedback from both curators and creatives suggests that their interactions with recommendation algorithms and social media platforms extend beyond mere intermediation or infomediation. Instead, it resembles the traditional patron system that historically shaped the art world's evolution. Initially, this system enabled influential individuals and organizations to showcase themselves through artist support [11, 14, 45]. With streaming and patronage sites, anyone can now assume the role of a patron [11, 92]. However, according to creatives, they must appease the "algorithm" to access their intended audience, departing from the traditional human patronage system promoting creative works.

This dynamic introduces the potential for the exploitative nature of creative work on social media platforms. Historically, *art* and creative work reflected the power and influence of the patron, creating a symbiotic relationship where each party supported and provided for the other [11, 14, 45]. In today's system, social media platforms wield a monopoly on audiences [30], allowing them to exploit creatives for *content* and ad revenue without treating their creative works with respect or care.

Both artists and curators advocate for change and have articulated their aspirations for reforming these systems. Curator E5 notes in Section 4.2 that digital tools can significantly reshape the audience-artwork relationship but require modification beyond shallow post representation. Similarly, creatives in Section 6.2 express frustration with the prevailing short-form *content* focus on social media platforms despite the financial viability (C8) and intrinsic value (C7) of long-form *content*. With both groups of participants expressing frustration with the status quo, there is a growing need for serious considerations about the future of *art* on social media.

The consensus among artists, curators, and creatives is that the current system for posting *art* on social media is ineffective and potentially exploitative, aligning with existing literature [39, 73, 79]. Where other researchers from Section 2.1 may call for a platform built on Marxist theory, we argue that our participants seek a platform built on curatorial practices. Participants highlight the need to reflect on different values and incentives that better promote creative work rather than optimizing for opaque engagement metrics that only support the platforms' ad revenue.

8 Limitations and Future Work

This paper presents qualitative findings from diverse stakeholders regarding elevating *art* from the all-encompassing label of *content*. Despite valuable findings, it's crucial to acknowledge limitations and potential biases in this qualitative study.

Firstly, most sampled curators primarily represent the Global North and are heavily affiliated with academic museums and institutions, potentially framing their perspectives and ideas. Secondly, during the stakeholder review with creatives, participants were chosen based on their established professional social media presence, raising the possibility that their dependencies on these platforms may influence their viewpoints.

Despite these limitations, the conversations and design materials establish a foundation for future research, offering valuable feedback for our team and others in the field. We intend to revisit **RQ3** with general social media users in place of content creators to get their thoughts on the proposed designs. Another study exploring how a TikTok dance video is received in a gallery space could reveal insights into perceiving such *content* as high *art*. Similarly, exploring methods to distinguish journalism or community activism from the vast pool of social media *content* is crucial. Finally, addressing the tendency of major platforms to categorize all human expression as *content* remains a key focus.

9 Conclusion

This paper seeks to challenge the social media experience by elevating *art* from the ubiquitous concept of *content*, which has become a catch-all term for all forms of information on these platforms. In this pursuit, we presented the findings of a pre-study and main study that illuminated four crucial characteristics that artists and curators consider essential for experiencing *art*: depth, conversation, connection, and time. Additionally, we present a collection of open-source screens. Both the characteristics and screens were reviewed by content creators and deemed desirable yet aspirational within the current ecosystem of advertisement revenue-driven social media.

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A Images

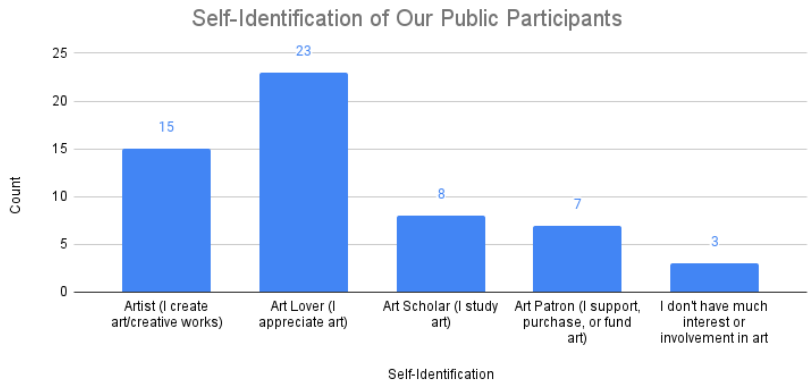

Fig. 8. The distribution of our public participants' selections for how they identify their relationship with *art*. They could select more than one category. Most selected Art Lover with Artist being the second most popular selection.

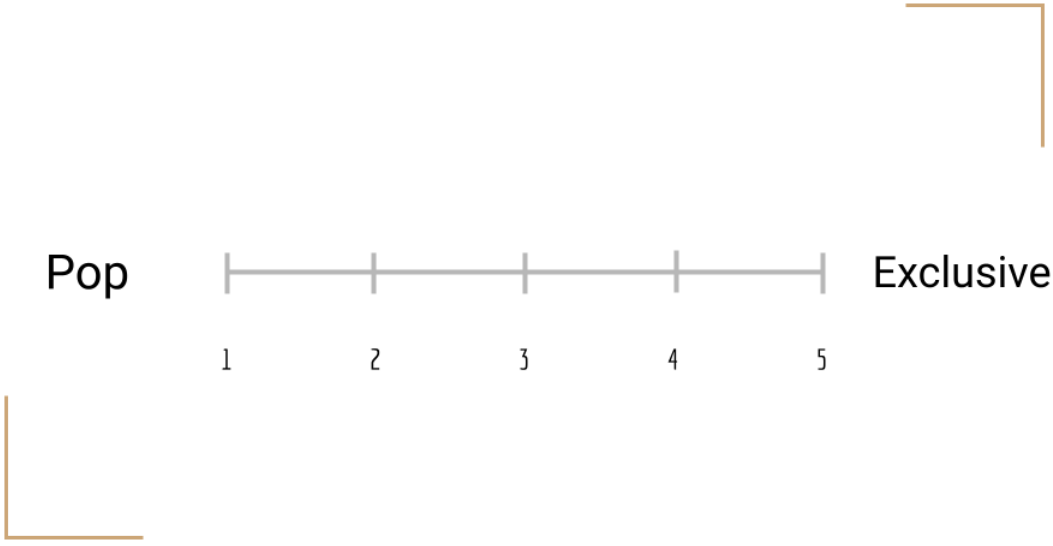

Fig. 9. This is an example of one of the Likert Scale items presented to our creatives in the Stakeholder Review. Each scale was presented individually asking the participant to respond with a number and then an explanation.

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