

# **Commercial Content Moderation (CCM): Exploring Antecedents of Performance**

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate my thesis to my father: (Late) Shri. Pradeep Kumar Misra - for always watching over me and instilling the values which have been the foundation for my life and career.

*Miss you always, Papa!*

## **My Inspirations at every point of the journey**

I have been fortunate to have two very strong and bold women in my life, who inspire me every day, to evolve and be a better version of myself. The first is my mother, Shubhra Misra, who is the wind below the wings. The second is my daughter, Aarushi, who is the ground below my feet.

I am inspired by my mother's resilience to start her career at the age of 60, when one typically eases into retirement. Twelve plus years later, she is a successful entrepreneur. She made me believe that I could restart my academic journey. Some things never change, she regularly checks in on me, shows me that nothing is impossible, and reminds me that every milestone on this journey is a win. She ensured I was never stuck, and always keep moving forward.

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## **Declaration**

Priti Kataria, a participant in the Executive Doctoral Program in Management of Indian Institute of Management, Indore, hereby declare that the thesis “Commercial Content Moderation (CCM): Exploring antecedents of Performance” is my original work. In the thesis, I have acknowledged and given credit to all sources and authors wherever I have used their ideas or words with appropriate citation and references. I also declare that I have adhered to the norms of academic ethics and integrity during data collection, data analysis and all phases of writing this thesis.

Priti Kataria

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## **Abstract**

The social media channels generate and consume a considerable amount of content, with 62.3% of the world's population using social media platforms (Chaffey, 2024). An individual spends approximately 2 hours and 20 minutes on social media (Chaffey, 2024). Given the high volume of content generation, the review and moderation of content is a growing commercial segment, presenting a huge business opportunity. The content moderation solutions market is being estimated to touch \$17.45 billion in 2027 at a CAGR of 12.45% (Content Moderation Solutions Market Analysis Report, 2022). The exponential growth of social media platforms has led to an unprecedented volume of User-Generated Content (UGC), making commercial content moderation (CCM) a mission-critical yet under-examined component of the digital economy (Crawford & Gillespie, 2016; Rojas-Galeano, 2017; Gillespie et al., 2018). CCM is the systematic process of screening UGC posted on social media sites and other online outlets to ascertain the "appropriateness of the content for a given site, locality, or jurisdiction," in conformance to predefined standards. (Roberts, 2017).

Existing research has primarily examined content moderation through a psychological or ethical lens (Cook et al., 2022; Dwoskin, 2019; Newton, 2019; Parks, 2019; Steiger, et al., 2021), focusing on trauma, stress, and wellbeing interventions (Dombrowski, Harmon, & Fox, 2016; Stephanidis et al., 2019; Barrett, 2020), while paying limited attention to the work processes, performance dynamics, and organisational conditions that shape moderators' daily experiences and outcomes. Given the high-speed, emotionally demanding, and morally complex nature of CCM work, and its growing reliance on human judgment alongside

algorithmic systems, there is a compelling need to develop grounded, process-oriented insights into how moderators perform, cope, and sustain themselves within this expanding sector.

Our study has three focal objectives. First, this study aims to explore and map the commercial content moderation workflow to understand how moderation work is organised, executed, and experienced by moderators within BPO-led IT/ITES environments. Second, it seeks to identify and analyse the key antecedents influencing moderators' short term daily performance, including individual, organisational, and contextual factors that affect efficiency, accuracy, and sustained work output. Third, the study examines the longer-term factors shaping moderators' performance trajectories, career continuity, and retention,

The study employed a qualitative method, and adopted an abductive qualitative theory-building approach. Utilizing focus group discussions, participant observations and archival documents, we finalised the questions that were critical to be asked for understanding the context. We then proceeded to hold focus semi structured interviews in an iterative fashion to unearth our findings (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013).

Our study has led to inform three aspects of organizational literature. While addressing the first research objective we have been able to extend the JD-R theory by identifying domain-specific job demands in Commercial Content Moderation, particularly high-speed cognitive processing, intrinsic cognitive overload from information-seeking, and content complexity. It also broadens job resources to include worker-devised coping strategies and identity alignment. Our research in the second objective leads us to extend the episodic process model of performance. We demonstrate that UGC characteristics act as boundary conditions for short-term performance episodes. Complex and novel content triggers negative performance pathways through cognitive overload and knowledge-seeking costs, while repeated exposure to low-complexity but disturbing content enables habituation and performance stability.

Habituation thus functions as a pathway-switching mechanism that conserves cognitive resources. Lastly our effort in understanding the long-term retention of content moderators lead us into the theoretical realm of “dirty work”. We extend the concept of dirty work in the specific domain of content moderator digital labour by conceptualising CCM as symbolic, non-physical dirty work with moral and social taints. We find the such taint is platform-defined and context-dependent depending on the queue the content moderator is working on. We explore the dynamics that directly influence long-term retention and career mobility in stigmatised digital work. We finally provide the recommendations for practice and the way forward.

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