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### Subjectivity and self-precarization among digital freelancers in the Swedish cultural industries

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# At least I have this freedom

## Subjectivity and self-precarization among digital freelancers in the Swedish cultural industries

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DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY | FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES | LUND UNIVERSITY





*At least I have this freedom*





# At least I have this freedom

Subjectivity and self-precarization among digital  
freelancers in the Swedish cultural industries

Daniel Karlsson



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## DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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**Abstract:** Cultural industries are currently being transformed by processes of platformization and precarization. Despite being among the sectors where platformization has already had the most pronounced effects, there remains a lack of research on cultural work as a prototypical example of so-called gig work. This dissertation analyzes the working experiences of what I call digital freelancers — solo self-employed cultural workers who extensively use digital platforms to find and carry out work on a task and piece basis as well as to manage their careers in contexts of precarity.

The main aim of the thesis is to contribute to the understanding of how digital freelancers are formed as a flexible and entrepreneurial workforce, at the intersection of the platform economy imposing piece-based and precarious working arrangements, and of freelancers' desires for meaningful, autonomous, and creative work. The study uses a digital ethnographic approach that combines interviews with digital freelancers and digital observations of the platforms that they frequent in order to find work, market themselves, network, and sustain their careers. Theoretically, I draw on Foucauldian theories of governmentality and subjectivation, and Marxian theories of immaterial and affective labor to understand the formation of digital freelance subjects. In particular, I develop the sociological understanding of the form of governmentality which Isabell Lorey has called self-precarization, by anchoring it in the lived experiences and biographies of digital freelancers in the context of the Swedish welfare state.

The study shows how the platform economy contributes to a fragmentation of both labor practices and worker subjectivities. I demonstrate how the platformization of cultural work must be understood in wider terms than what is common in the sociological literature on gig work, where much emphasis is on labor platforms. Instead, I introduce the concept of patchworking to analyze how digital freelancers manage platform precarity by patching together incomes from several types of platforms. I also show how the platform economy leads to a proliferation of unpaid labor, both in terms of taking commissions with little or no compensation and doing uncompensated, reproductive tasks needed to sustain a platform career. I find that digital freelancers negotiate and attach different meanings to unpaid work, often legitimizing it as an investment in their future, while also critiquing or distinguishing themselves from forms they think are unfair or exploitative. Furthermore, I analyze the self-branding practices of digital freelancers and identify different imperatives by which they are encouraged to put their subjectivities to market as commodities or assets. I show why it is necessary to understand self-branding as a multi-platformed practice that functions as an individualized solution for dealing with precarity that also orients freelancers as productive subjects that contribute to the business models of platform companies. Finally, I argue for the importance of studying precarization as a productive process entangled with the formation of subjectivity. I identify several tensions in how my respondents form their professional subjectivities, through which they often normalize and legitimize individual risk and insecurity, while also articulating critique and resistance against it. By focusing on freelancers' own accounts of how they identify with their work and grapple with the tensions involved, I bring out the nuances of how digital freelancers negotiate insecurity and uncertainty as a new normal.

**Key words:** digital freelancing, subjectivity, self-precarization, gig work, immaterial labor, cultural industries, creative work, platform economy, self-branding, precarity, digital governmentality, biopolitics

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# At least I have this freedom

Subjectivity and self-precarization among digital  
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Daniel Karlsson



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# Chapter 1. Introduction

Ever since Adam was young, drawing and painting have been almost existential necessities for him.<sup>1</sup> By the time he was in high school, Adam was already freelancing as a graphic designer to earn extra income from his creativity. When I interviewed him over Zoom during the Covid-19 pandemic, he was in his mid 20s. From Adam's residence in a mid-size Swedish city, he designs logotypes, websites, and graphical profiles for clients nationwide, finding most commissions through social media platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn. To make ends meet, he also works extra as a consultant for the municipality. On his website, he markets a broad range of competences, describing himself as an "advertising agency in one person". He told me that he also has plans to create video content and launch and monetize a YouTube channel, where he can share his creative process with viewers and draw traffic to his website and Instagram profile.

Adam cherishes the autonomy of being self-employed, particularly when compared to the alienation of working as a telemarketer, which he describes as "the most soul-crushing thing I've ever done". However, since starting his own company, he often feels anxious and stressed over his economic situation and the lack of social safety nets. At one point, he suffered from burnout. Adam works 6–12 hours a day, weekends and many holidays included, mostly from a desk next to the bed of his small one-room apartment. He makes no clear distinction between work time and leisure time, and told me that "I think about work all the time".

Therese is also a graphic- and web designer. She lives in Stockholm and describes herself as a "creative gigger". While she has freelanced for more than 15 years, Therese does not frame this as an active choice so much as a necessity due to the difficulty of finding permanent employment. When I spoke to her, she was struggling with her creative career due to an extended sick leave after suffering from burnout, during which she was subjected to what she describes as the "bizarrely bureaucratic" rules of the Public Employment Agency and the Social Insurance Agency for the self-employed. As she was not allowed to have an active company while receiving unemployment benefits, she shut down her company when the Covid-19 pandemic started. Instead, she used the umbrella company *Frilans Finans* for invoicing the occasional gig.

Therese spent several hours each day scanning the labor platforms Fiverr and Upwork for gigs, updating her social media channels and increasing her online

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<sup>1</sup> All names of participants are pseudonyms.

presence; yet, this yielded very little in terms of commissions. She claims to experience extreme competition from students and younger freelancers who drive down prices by working for little or no money, as well as from gig workers on international labor platforms who sell their services cheaply. Furthermore, she expressed that the Covid-19 pandemic reduced the demand for her services. While keeping the ambition to partly continue her freelance career, Therese's current career dream is to find a permanent position working part time at 50%, which would reduce her stress and lend her some economic security before her retirement.

Sara is a digital content creator and blogger with her own company. By building her personal brand through her blog and podcast, she has managed to attract not only followers but also sponsors and brands who collaborate with her through influencer marketing deals in which they pay her for visibility in her channels. Her personal brand and reputation also allow Sara to give lectures, which provides her with more or less steady income — or at least it did before the Covid-19 pandemic. To make up for lost income streams during the pandemic, she had, when I spoke to her, relatively recently started a membership program for donations through the crowdfunding platform Patreon, where she provided exclusive digital content to subscribers who pay a fixed amount of either €5, €25, or €50 per month.

Identifying with an “alternative” feminized entrepreneurial ethos (Arvidsson, 2020), Sara told me she was sick of what she described as a masculine “stereotype of this ‘slick seller-guy’ [...] or this ‘entrepreneurial man’ who starts a thousand projects just to make millions”. She explains that “there are other ways to run a business. There are other reasons to have a company”. While Sara acknowledged the insecurity of her chosen career path, she retained an opportunistic outlook and framed the riskiness as part of what made her work exciting. “A large part of the allure is that things are different, that things change”, she claimed, before adding that “I have no problem that things might get worse. Well, yeah, then I’ll have to take a part-time job. There are always solutions”.

\*\*\*

Adam, Therese, and Sara are active as what I in this thesis call *digital freelancers* in the cultural industries. Their stories illustrate different aspects of what it means to make, or aspire to make, a living as freelancing cultural workers in the Swedish gig economy. Separately, they display seemingly heterogenous motives, desires, and struggles that have led them to pursue careers requiring them to secure the next project or “gig” before the present one is finished and to combine several different income streams. Yet, closer inspection shows patterns in their experiences and ways of reasoning that I argue illustrate ongoing transformations of today's world of work as well as the laboring subjects engaged within it.

Taking a worker's perspective, this dissertation explores how the work experiences and subjectivities of digital freelancers like Adam, Therese, and Sara are formed in a labor market currently shaped by interconnected processes of

platformization and precarization. From these three vignettes alone, we can pose a number of questions: What opportunities and challenges does the platform economy offer for digital freelancers like them? How does it contribute to new forms of insecurity and precarity for cultural workers? And how are the subjectivities of digital freelancers shaped by demands to make themselves visible and marketable online, to brand and promote themselves to appease algorithms, and to sustain affective relations with others over a range of different platforms?

To answer questions like these, the study is based on a digital ethnographic approach that combines in-depth interviews with digital freelancers and digital observations of the different platforms they use for marketing themselves, finding gigs, and socializing with other freelancers. The interviews are used to analyze the freelancers' accounts of their working experiences, practices, and subjectivities. This is combined with online observations to provide an understanding of the wider social, cultural, and discursive context in which they are active, as well as how they communicate with each other, market themselves, and move between and combine different platforms to find work. Through this approach, I examine the tensions and contradictions between the promises of the platform economy — of enabling creative, fulfilling, autonomous careers to all who are willing to work for it — and the lived experiences of those who try to make a living through it.

The interviewees are professionally active in commercial (rather than artistic) fields of cultural production, including graphic design, illustration, content creation on social media, online marketing, photography, professional blogging, and copywriting.<sup>2</sup> This broad sample is used to identify cross-sectoral trends and to make a point about today's diversified and heterogeneous labor markets. To support themselves, the interviewees are typically engaged in several of these fields at once. Many combine freelance commissions with part-time work outside their main professional identity, or with atypical, non-waged incomes such as crowdfunding or influencer marketing collaborations. This affirms McRobbie's (2016a:27) observation that, for today's cultural workers, "being a specialist rather than a multi-skilled 'creative' is becoming a thing of the past". I aim to explore the heterogeneous reality of being a multi-skilled creative, of using multiple digital platforms, and of patching together a living from multiple income streams, which I argue illustrate wider ongoing trends and tendencies on the labor market.

While freelance careers have long been more common in the cultural industries than in many other sectors, these careers are today maintained in an economy where interactions, transactions, and income opportunities are increasingly mediated through commercial *digital platforms*. Platforms — with Facebook, Google, and Amazon being some of the most well-known — are often defined as technological infrastructures that intermediate interactions between different user groups, such as consumers, workers, employers, companies, or advertisers. Yet, platforms are not neutral infrastructures that simply "reflect the social: they *produce* the social

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<sup>2</sup> Some also engage in artistic projects on the side, but not as their main point of identification.

structures we live in” today (van Dijck et al., 2018:2). Platforms (often owned by large companies with monopolistic aspirations, such as Alphabet or Meta) not only enable interactions but also steer and govern them with the aim of shaping behaviors and extracting surplus value from user data (Srnicek, 2017:43).

The study ties into the growing sociological literature on the platformization of work and the growth of what has been labeled a “gig”, “sharing”, or “platform economy”. Lately, research has been conducted on everything from the scope of the gig economy (Berg et al., 2018; Palm, 2019; Ilsøe et al., 2021), to the challenges it poses for legislation and regulation (De Stefano, 2015; Stewart & Stanford, 2017), on the historicization of the gig economy (Finkin, 2015; Stanford, 2017), on how platforms use algorithmic management and surveillance as new forms of control (Wood et al., 2019; Gandini, 2019; Woodcock, 2020), and how platform workers organize resistance (Maffie, 2020; Però & Downey, 2024). Yet, we still know little — particularly in the Swedish context — of how workers navigate the volatile waters of the platform economy to make a living, and what this work means for them, their everyday lives, and the formation of their subjectivities.

Furthermore, while food couriers and other forms of “place-dependent” gig work constitute the most visible elements of the contemporary gig economy in both public debates and previous research, cultural labor has seldom been studied as a prototypical example of gig work (see Alacovska et al., 2024). This is surprising, considering that the cultural industries are among the sectors where the effects of gigification and the spread of non-standard work are most prominent, at least in the Nordics and Sweden (Palm, 2019; Ilsøe et al., 2021). Cultural and “creative” professions also constitute a large and growing proportion of the number of freelancers and solo self-employed in Sweden and the Nordics (Tillväxtverket, 2019; Cool Company, 2020; Ilsøe et al., 2021). This study contributes with valuable knowledge on a setting where platformization has already had quite profound effects on working life, yet is rarely recognized in the debates on platform work. A key contribution of the study is thus to broaden the scope of what we mean by the “gigification” of the labor market.

Techno-optimistic writers have long hoped that the digital economy would democratize cultural production by making it possible for everyone to bypass the traditional gatekeepers of the cultural industries (Benkler, 2006; Anderson, 2008). Digital platforms and social networking sites have certainly made it easier to produce, spread, and monetize cultural commodities to a potentially wide audience, as well as to market and brand oneself to gain competitive advantages. Yet, as this dissertation shows, actually making a living, finding work, and getting adequately paid in the platform economy also produces a number of new challenges. This includes doing much unpaid work in order to establish themselves and stand out against the competition; incessantly market and put themselves on display online; continuously maintain one’s online visibility and reputation; and research and adapt one’s online activities to ever-elusive algorithmic sorting and management systems.

As Palm (2019) notes in a research review, much sociological research of platform work has privileged case studies or comparisons of specific labor platforms — that is, platforms mediating between the buyers and sellers of labor power for a fee, typically without being classified as employers — such as Uber and Amazon Mechanical Turk. While important and often insightful, I argue that case studies of specific labor platforms may not be the best way of capturing how working life is reshaped by platformization. Previous research shows that few workers find the majority of their work through labor platforms and that such platforms thus far only constitute a minor part in the ongoing trend of labor markets moving toward precarious, insecure, and non-standard (casual, on-demand, freelancing, part-time, et cetera.) forms of labor (Fleming et al., 2019). Instead, recent studies point to how many platform workers combine multiple gigs, jobs, clients, and sources of income to support themselves (Ilsøe et al., 2021; Alacovska, 2022; Altenried, 2022).

This indicates the need for a wider research agenda that explores how precarious and atypical cultural work is “lived out” in the digital economy in a broader sense. For this objective, I examine how digital freelancers manage their careers and form their subjectivities in an ever-shifting environment of new platforms, changing algorithms, short gigs, varying projects, fluctuating audiences, multiple clients, and atypical sources of income. I strive to move beyond techno-centric approaches that take particular digital platforms as the focus, to instead take the perspective of workers themselves, given that we know relatively little about how workers navigate the platform economy when trying to make a living, how they make use of and adapt different platforms, and how the platform economy contributes to the formation of labor subjectivities.

By following digital freelancers’ practices of seeking gigs, establishing income streams, and marketing themselves over several different platforms, I explore how they make a living through the platform economy. I seek to bridge what Jarrett (2022a:24) recently called the “peculiar schism” in the digital labor literature. This schism has meant that sociologists interested in studying gig work have largely studied labor platforms (e.g., Uber, Deliveroo, Bolt, or Amazon Mechanical Turk), while researchers from media studies to a large extent have been concerned with unpaid user-labor on social media platforms. Jarrett (2022a:24) rightly notes that there is “very little cross-fertilization of ideas between the two fields”. I argue that bridging these fields is necessary for understanding work in a post-wage setting, where freelancers are engaged in interactions and transactions that often fall outside the confines of employment and that extend over many different types of platforms.

As I argue in the following chapters, sustaining a career as a digital freelancer in Sweden involves not only, or even primarily, taking commissions through labor platforms like Fiverr or Upwork. It also involves finding gigs and creating income opportunities through social media platforms; using digital marketplaces and web shops to sell cultural goods; monetizing cultural content through influencer collaborations, partnerships and crowdfunding; developing web-based courses; and many other ways. It also requires sustained efforts at marketing and branding

oneself over different platforms, contributing content to make oneself visible online, engaging in professional freelance communities, and building virtual networks. These efforts increase the scope of the labor traditionally required from cultural freelancers and subjects them to new forms of dependency, as their means of supporting themselves become mediated through obtuse algorithmic systems, competitive platforms, and demands to engage in various forms of unpaid work.

As digital freelancers cannot rely on any one employer for continuous employment, I further analyze how their reliance on a number of different platforms is one way to guard against unemployment and the “nested precarities” (Duffy et al., 2021) of platform work. In turn, this dependence on multiple platforms increases the freelancers’ workload and reproduces the precarity of their position in new ways, as workers have to internalize risks and responsibilities in exchange for lofty promises of self-fulfilling, autonomous work. This dissertation sets out to interrogate this complex interplay of precarity, subjectivity, and desire in today’s digitalized labor markets. I use freelance work in the cultural industries both as a case for studying how these tensions play out within these sectors specifically and for studying the tendential effects of platformization and precarization on today’s labor market and political economy more broadly.

In addition to studying how digital freelancers make a living and manage precarity, the dissertation also focuses on their *subjectivities* — how they define and understand themselves and the world around them — and how these are formed through the platform economy. As we saw in the vignettes in the beginning of the chapter, workers like Adam, Therese, and Sara invest a great deal of themselves, their affects, and their identities in their work. I argue that this aligns with cultural and ideological ideals of feeling passion for one’s work and creating a meaningful life through it. As Berardi (2009:78) notes, for many people, work and enterprise have today become “the center towards which desire is focused”, an observation echoed by many of my interviewees.

Today, the intersections between subjectivity, affect, and precarious self-enterprise need to be placed within the context of digital platform capitalism. To situate the experiences and narratives of my interviewees, I therefore also attend to the discourses around digital freelancing that permeate the various platforms they frequent. Discourses and narratives around platform work are highly ambiguous and contradictory. On the one hand, the gig economy is increasingly being recognized as challenging the institutions of standard salaried employment by intensifying processes of precarization and exploitation, and bringing about new forms of algorithmic management and control that situate workers in new kinds of dependence to algorithms and digital forms of enclosure (Wood et al., 2019; Woodcock, 2020). On the other hand, many platforms today also sell fantasies of “being your own boss” as a freelancer as the “highest pinnacle of labour market freedom” (Purcell & Brook, 2022:397). On a freelance platform like Upwork, which intermediates gigs for cultural, communicative, and cognitive services, we find inspirational articles like this:

# The 10 Best Benefits of Freelancing



The Upwork Team  
Aug 2, 2023 | 10 Min Read

Work & Career Article



Curious? Read on to discover many of the advantages of being a freelancer.

Top freelancing benefits:

1. [More freedom](#)
2. [Flexible hours](#)
3. [Self-management](#)
4. [Location flexibility](#)
5. [Compensation and earnings control](#)
6. [Increased skills](#)
7. [Ability to test a startup or small business concept](#)
8. [No office politics](#)
9. [Opportunity to specialize](#)
10. [Job security](#)

Figure 1.1. Screenshots from an inspirational article from the freelance platform Upwork (2023).

In this article, Upwork not only celebrates digital freelancing as a source of freedom, flexibility, and autonomy but also somewhat surprisingly — but very tellingly — as a form of job security. Fragmented, diversified freelance work is promoted as something to be embraced in order to protect and immunize (Lorey, 2015) oneself from the new world of work, where relying on a single employer is increasingly a thing of the past. Such narratives and discourses reorient independent, non-salaried work from something that in the heyday of Fordism was to be feared into something to be desired. This is particularly interesting in the Swedish context, where the so-called Swedish model or the Nordic welfare regime has been built around the norm of full-time employment (Ilsøe et al., 2021). Interrogating how digital freelancers negotiate and form their subjectivities in relation to such discourses, I add to the understanding of the tendential processes through which atypical, non-standard work in Sweden is being normalized through the platform economy.

In the following chapters, I ask what kind of subject the *digital freelancer* is and how it is formed through platform-mediated forms of self-branding, piece-based patchwork careers, and insecure working arrangements. In particular, I explore how the formation of digital freelancers as a flexible, multi-tasking, on-demand labor force intersects with, but potentially also challenges, the spread of precarious atypical work. I seek to identify and draw out their common characteristics as a category of laboring subjects and to understand how this category becomes connected both to the normalization of, and resistance to, precarization.

I propose that digital freelancers must be seen as a largely ambiguous, hybrid-category of laboring subjects. On one hand, they display many of the characteristics that digital labor markets need in order to function. Digital freelancers are not only accustomed to, but often seem to more or less willingly seek out, careers with insecure, entrepreneurial working conditions. In this sense, they serve a clear need



in contemporary capitalism. On the other hand, as we saw earlier in the stories of Adam, Therese, and Sara, we must also recognize and take seriously these workers' own desires for meaningful, self-expressive, creative, and autonomous work. The respondents of this study attach much meaning to their freelance careers, despite these often being vulnerable and precarious. While this can make them susceptible to exploitation and arrangements that rely on them doing unpaid or badly compensated work, it ultimately also opens up for questions about how we can imagine "good work" in the platform economy.

## Aim and research questions

The overarching aim of the thesis is to contribute to the understanding of how digital freelance subjects are formed and produced as a flexible and entrepreneurial labor force at the intersection of the platform economy imposing precarious work arrangements, and freelancers' own desires for meaningful, autonomous, and creative work. By using interviews and digital observations as my main methods, I seek to understand how they make a living in fragmented digital labor markets, how subjectivities are formed through platforms, and what new challenges and opportunities arise through the diversified eco-systems of digital platforms and heterogenous working arrangements.

With the aims of the study in mind, four research questions have been formulated. These are addressed throughout the dissertation as a whole but also specifically correspond to the four analytical chapters as they appear in order:

1. How do digital freelancers navigate the platform economy in order to make a living and manage precarity?
2. How is digital freelancing entangled with the performance of unpaid work, and how are boundaries between paid and unpaid work negotiated, normalized, and given meaning?
3. How are digital freelancers branding and marketing themselves in an algorithmic, multi-platform environment?
4. How is precarious work negotiated, accounted for, justified, and challenged by digital freelancers when they form their subjectivities?

Through these questions, I set out to analyze the heterogenous strategies, practices, and subjectivities of digital freelancers when navigating the platform economy, both as these are narrated through interviews and visible on digital platforms. Of special interest is how the platform economy contributes to the precarization of cultural work and to explore how it offers new opportunities and counter-strategies that can be utilized to make a living. I strive for an approach that avoids both techno-optimism and techno-pessimism, by emphasizing the tensions, frictions, and ambiguities that arise in the encounters between freelancers and platforms.

I situate the study between two fields of sociology: the sociology of work and cultural sociology. From the sociology of work, it takes its interest in exploring the platformization of working life and to situate this topic within broader transformations of labor markets and the political economy. From cultural sociology, it takes an interest not only in cultural production but also in conceiving working life as inherently intertwined with meaning making, discursive processes, and ideology. Theoretically, I draw primarily on Marxian theories about the production of labor power and subjectivity, and Foucauldian perspectives on governmentality, subjectivation, and precarization.

## Digital freelancers, self-precariation, and subjectivity

I use *digital freelancers* both as a descriptive and analytical concept in the thesis. Descriptively, I use it as a catchword for the growing group of freelancers, gig workers, and independent contractors who extensively — but not exclusively — use digital platforms, apps, and the internet to find and carry out work. Digital freelancers tend to take on multiple commissions on a gig, piece, or project basis. They often complement their freelance income with part-time work outside their chosen profession, and/or atypical non-waged forms of income.

Sweden provides an interesting institutional context for exploring both the subjective and objective characteristics of digital freelance labor. One contribution of the thesis is to examine the contours of precarious freelance labor in a setting where work is still relatively highly regulated, governed by the Swedish model of labor negotiations that have long privileged standard employment in large companies over entrepreneurship and self-employment. Sweden, which used to be a prototypical example of a social democratic welfare state (cf. Esping-Andersen, 1993), has long been seen as a role model for good working conditions (Norbäck and Styhre, 2019). Despite decades of neoliberal deregulation, Sweden is still, in a broader international context, associated with a comparatively strong welfare state, a high degree of unionization, and expansive social security systems. Yet, as the Swedish model continues to be built around the norm of standard full-time employment and the collective bargaining of the labor market parties (Ilsøe et al., 2021), digital freelancers lack the security of employees and risk falling between the cracks of social security systems (cf. Bucht, 2022).

Freelancers in Sweden are formally solo self-employed (without employees of their own), either being sole traders (Swe: *enskild näringsidkare*) or having limited companies (*aktiebolag*). Solo self-employed workers pay business tax (*F-skatt*); however, a small but growing number of freelancers also use umbrella companies (*egenanställningsföretag*) that handle their invoicing, deduct taxes, and pay their salaries. The two biggest umbrella companies in Sweden are Frilans Finans and Cool Company. The Swedish branch of Frilans Finans has a turnover of more than

a billion Swedish kronor a year (Antonsson, 2021). Both companies take about a 6% fee from every invoice they handle. These companies frame themselves as taking employer responsibility for the freelancers who use them, but the legal status of *egenanställda* is disputed (see Wingborg, 2017).

I do not use digital freelancers as a mere descriptive term. Analytically, I also use it to denote a particular *figure of laboring subjects* (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). I understand digital freelancers as a heterogenous hybrid figure (cf. Armano & Murgia, 2017; Repenning & Oechslen, 2023) that is formally self-employed but that blurs the boundaries between different forms of income, as well as between work and non-work. Digital freelancers combine elements from other overlapping worker-conceptualizations, such as cultural freelancers, content creators, gig workers, and platform entrepreneurs, without fully fitting into any of them. The digital freelancers studied in this thesis are all cultural workers, but not all cultural workers are freelancers, or as dependent on platforms for sustaining their careers. Likewise, digital freelancers share many elements with the longer tradition of freelance workers but exhibit distinctly new elements driven by platformization. Digital freelancers may engage in similar practices as digital content creators who monetize social media content, but they also engage in other forms of income-generating practices. They might also engage in gig work, but do not find commissions solely through labor platforms. The term *digital freelancer* thus describes a figure of labor that operates between several coexisting and interrelated logics, and that combines creative, entrepreneurial, and digital work practices.

In the thesis, I draw on both Marxian and Foucauldian theory to answer how the subjectivities of digital freelancers — how they perceive themselves and the world around them — are formed in the context of platform capitalism and the gig economy. In particular, I explore the links between subjectivity and precarity for this group of workers. While precarization in much sociological research is approached as a process that mainly makes working life more insecure and temporary, I approach it as a form of subjectivation that also affects people in their everyday lives, far outside the confines of the traditional workplace. Drawing particularly on Isabell Lorey (2011, 2015), I study precarization as a normalizing process, which I argue is central for contemporary platform capitalism through the *production of a flexible and contingent labor force*, accustomed to working and living with precarity.

One theoretical aim of the thesis is to show how digital freelancers constitute themselves as a labor force in the tensions between their desire for meaningful, autonomous, and creative work, and digital capital's need for flexible and exploitable labor. Much previous research on the production of laboring subjectivities — particularly within the governmentality tradition — has focused on how discourses are disseminated and subjectivities intervened on “from above” by various authorities, particularly through various textual sources. As has been increasingly recognized lately (see for instance Norbäck, 2021a, 2021b; Hansen Löffstrand & Jacobsson, 2022), such approaches — while valuable in their own right

— are inadequate for understanding how attempts at governing and shaping subjectivities are received and negotiated by the subjects themselves in their everyday lives. Concurring with Hansen Löffstrand and Jacobsson (2022:2), this requires a more ethnographic sensitivity to the lived experiences of subjects than what we usually find in the literature. Therefore, this thesis contributes with valuable knowledge on the formation of digital freelance subjectivities in the Swedish cultural industries.

With the *cultural industries*, I mean industries producing symbolic, aesthetic, and communicative commodities and services that convey meaning through texts, symbols, images, signs, and sounds (cf. Banks, 2007:2). I understand *cultural workers* as those professionally engaged in the production of meaningful texts and symbols as commodities or services (see Hesmondhalgh, 2013:6). Cultural work today is also increasingly tied to the valorization of performative “virtuosic” (Virno, 2003) communicative acts on digital platforms, which produces what Lazzarato (1996:138) has called the “cultural environment” of consumption, including branded spaces. The thesis is primarily concerned with the production of symbolical and communicative goods and services for commercial (rather than artistic) purposes, but makes no evaluative distinction between the production of art, entertainment, media content, or advertising. Several participants engage in artistic practices on the side, but not as their main source of income.

The study contributes to the literature on precarization and gigification of often highly skilled and educated cultural workers (Ekman, 2014; Norbäck, 2021b) — workers who are likely to have high cultural capital but relatively little economic capital. McRobbie (2016a:35) describes these new creative middle classes as “guinea pigs for testing out the new world of work”, paving the way for atypical careers of micro-entrepreneurship as an aspirational (but largely fictional) form of class mobility. In this vein, I argue that digital freelancers in the cultural industries, although they certainly do not dominate the labor market in any quantitative sense, constitute an interesting *tendential* case (cf. Hardt & Negri, 2005:109) for studying the dispersion of non-standard careers of digital entrepreneurial labor. I see digital freelancers as being at the forefront of testing out a new world of precarious digital work, which may or may not materialize for broader segments of workers.

What makes the case of digital freelancers in the cultural industries particularly interesting is how they relate to their atypical form of employment. Whereas precarious working and living conditions are imposed in many sectors of the labor market, particularly within the service sectors and the gig economy of migrant workers and so-called “low-skilled” labor, the cultural workers in focus of this thesis often account for their self-employment status as self-chosen. According to one survey, 86% of the solo self-employed in Sweden state that they are self-employed *by their own choice*, and 98% state that they enjoy being “their own boss” (Eurofound, 2017:11). Solo self-employed workers are not only accustomed to insecure work but also take these conditions as more or less self-evident, natural, and, sometimes, desirable. At the same time, if we go back to the vignettes in the

beginning of the chapter, many of the interviewees have experienced poverty, work-related stress, anxiety, sleeplessness, and burnout. Several interviewees express having difficulties supporting themselves financially and finding work, as well as having experiences of falling between the cracks of welfare systems.

To make sense of these seemingly contradictory narratives, I draw on Lorey's (2009, 2015) notion of *self-precarization*. She theorizes cultural and artistic workers as a group that often frames their career as a voluntary choice, having willingly opted in for precarious work. Yet, Lorey, as a political theorist, has not researched this process empirically. In the following chapters, I seek to develop the sociological understanding of self-precarization in the platform economy, anchored in how workers reason about their careers. In studying precarization as (in some sense) self-chosen, I do not try to determine how much autonomy freelancers "really" have in shaping their lives and working conditions. Rather, I analyze the ways in which different discourses and ideological fantasies of work intersect with the normalization of individualized risk, responsibility, and insecurity on the labor market. By using both interview material and digital observations, I contribute with nuanced and dynamic understandings of how freelance subjectivities are formed in relation to the complex restructurings of the social, cultural, and economic landscape of contemporary capitalism.

## Outline of the thesis

The dissertation is structured as follows. In the following chapter, I contextualize the study in relation to previous research and provide a historical background to the contemporary world of digital freelancing. Chapter 2 also includes some conceptual and definitional work, as I engage with concepts like digital labor, platformization, cultural labor, and precarization, which are central for the rest of the thesis. Building upon those discussions, I present the theoretical framework in chapter 3. Theoretically, I draw on both Foucauldian governmentality and Marxian perspectives with an ambition to put them in productive dialogue with each other. In chapter 4, I discuss the methodological and analytical strategies that have guided the research process and the collection of data. The dissertation utilizes both qualitative interviews and digital ethnography as the primary methods.

The remainder of the dissertation is dedicated to the analytical chapters. Chapter 5 and chapter 6 both focus on the practices and accounts of how digital freelancers navigate the platform economy to make a living. Chapter 5 introduces the concept of patchworking to analyze the practices of figuratively stitching together a living from several different types of income streams by using a set of different digital platforms. In contrast to the many existing case studies of particular platforms, this chapter argues that it is important to recognize the relationality of platforms and how workers may use a wide set of platforms for different purposes. Chapter 6

builds on the preceding chapter but focuses particularly on the unpaid work involved in sustaining a digital freelance career. In order to understand this work — and indeed, today's world of work in wider terms — I argue it is essential to separate work from paid employment and to study work beyond the wage labor institution.

Chapters 7 and 8 dive deeper into questions of subjectivity. Chapter 7 explores self-branding and algorithmic labor among digital freelancers by examining how they negotiate various discourses around how to market oneself successfully in the platform economy. Exploring these questions, the chapter works as a bridge between chapters 6 and 8. On one hand, it directly builds upon chapter 6, as I consider self-branding as a major (but mostly unpaid) form of immaterial labor that falls outside of employment while still generating value for platform companies. On the other hand, I argue self-branding on platforms must also be seen as a form of subjectivation that produces particular subjects accustomed to the dictates of the platform economy. In this, it relates to chapter 8, which finally explores how digital freelance subjectivities are negotiated by my participants. In particular, it explores the tensions between enterprise and precarity. Using the notion of self-precariatization as a lens, I explore how subjectivity is a crucial dimension for understanding how insecure work today is not only accepted but also normalized and even turned into something positive and desirable.

Chapter 9, finally, presents the main conclusions and contributions of the study and ends with some reflections on what the thesis might tell us about today's society and future worlds of work.



# Chapter 2. A new world of work?

The notion that working life is changing has become something of a truism. We are often told that older ideals of stable careers and lifelong employment have been challenged by boundaryless careers of market-mediated work and that working life globally has become more uncertain for many workers — a trend that has been fueled both by the emergence of the platform economy and the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The newness of what Beck (2000) has called the “brave new world of work” should, however, not be taken for granted: It must be identified in dialogue with the past, which will inevitably show both change and continuity.

With this aim, this chapter uses previous research to paint a social, historical, and cultural background against which the research problems can be contextualized. This forms the foundation for the theoretical framework presented in chapter 3 as well as a backdrop against which the later analytical chapters should be read. While the chapter allows a contextualization of the analytical chapters, it has no ambition to be an all-encompassing literature review. I engage more with previous research in the analytical chapters in relation to the arguments presented there.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, I discuss some of the trends that have shaped contemporary capitalism, with particular attention to the normalization of non-standard work in Sweden. Thereafter, I situate digital freelancing within research on precarization and entrepreneurialization. Following that, I discuss freelance work in the cultural industries and the characteristics of cultural labor. Finally, I focus on the platformization of work and of cultural labor in particular.

## Tracing the contours of contemporary capitalism

While there is broad consensus in the literature that capitalism and the world of work in the global North has undergone profound structural transformations since the 1970s, there is little agreement on how this should be conceptualized. Many have described this as a transition from a Fordist regime to a post-Fordist, flexible, or financial regime (e.g., Harvey, 1990; Jessop, 1994; Amin, 1994; Hardt & Negri, 2000; for Sweden, see Alfonsson, 2020). Some suggest that we have moved from an industrial society to a post-industrial knowledge society (Bell, 1973), an informational network society (Castells, 1999), or a new phase of late capitalism (Mandel, 1980). Others frame these transformations in relation to modernity,



arguing that we have entered a condition of late modernity (Giddens, 1999), liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000), or a second modernity (Beck, 2000). More recently, scholars have conceptualized the digital economy as a sharing economy (Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017), gig economy (Woodcock & Graham, 2020), platform economy (Kenney & Zysman, 2016), platform capitalism (Srnicke, 2017), informational capitalism (Fuchs, 2010), cognitive capitalism (Vercellone, 2007; Reckwitz, 2021), surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), and so on.

Rather than fully subscribing to any of these concepts, I do in this chapter trace out some of the processes that have led up to the present moment. These include flexibilization, financialization, neoliberalization, and platformization. By focusing on processes with different degrees of presence in different contexts, I aim to avoid reifying a mode of production as historically and spatially stable and homogenous.

### **Work beyond Fordism: Flexibilization, financialization, platformization**

Contemporary capitalism is often compared with an idealized previous era, often called Fordism. Fordism — sometimes described with a nostalgic shimmer as a lost Eden of supposedly secure and stable work — usually describes an era in the global North during the post-war years up until the 1970s, when stable growth was secured through a cycle of increases in productivity, wages, profits, consumer demand, and industrial investments, facilitated by consensus-oriented compromises between the Keynesian interventionist state, capital, and organized labor (Jessop, 1994).

Many have discussed and problematized the characteristics of Fordism in much more depth than I do here. However, one aspect worth emphasizing is that the employment structure of Fordism is typically epitomized by the standard employment relationship — a “gendered model of employment based on a breadwinner model of male citizen worker who works full time for a single employer, on the employer’s premises and who receives employment-based benefits” (Cohen, 2016:28). Standard employment is characterized by regulatory mechanisms protecting workers from direct market relations and commodification, and by compensating workers not only for selling their labor power but also, for instance, for taking vacation and sick leave (Vosko, 2011:4 Rubery et al., 2018).

With the global economic crises of the 1970s and the breakdown of the Fordist model, a number of different processes were set in motion that have challenged the normative status of the standard employment relationship, globally and in Sweden. Harvey (1990:142) writes that the crises fueled a flexibilization of Western labor markets, which gave rise to “entirely new sectors of production, new ways of providing financial services, new markets, and, above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organizational innovation”. Digitalization and computerization enabled new forms of just-in-time and lean production, which corresponded to transformed consumer patterns for on-demand services. This created extended production chains, as companies could outsource and offshore

production to sub-contractors, often in low-wage, non-unionized countries in the global South (see also Jarrett, 2022a:14).

Cheap information technologies and digital platforms have since enabled further outsourcing and subcontracting (Srnicek, 2017:18). In the global North, industrial production has declined as a result, while other sectors have become more prominent, pointing to a transition from blue-collar to white-collar labor. In Sweden, work in the service and public sectors has steadily surged since the 1970s and 1980s. In 2018, these sectors employed 80% of the workforce, while only 18% were employed in the traditional industries (Schön, 2012:293; Alfonsson, 2020:132). Cognitive and knowledge workers have furthermore become seen as all the more central parts of the workforce, as industries increasingly valorize information and various social, immaterial, and technological skills (Castells, 1999; Alvesson, 2004; Barley & Kunda, 2006; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009; Gandini, 2016).

These changes have been accompanied by an ideological shift to neoliberalism. Where the Keynesian state strived to uphold a balance between capital and labor to secure growth and social welfare, the neoliberal state instead favors the open market and national competitiveness by subordinating “social policy to the needs of labour market flexibility and/or the constraints of international competition” (Jessop, 1994:263). Neoliberal politics — epitomized by the election of Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Reagan in the United States — represent a strong belief in free markets, free trade, and free competition, secured through extensive privatization, deregulation, and financialization. Such policies, along with attacks against organized labor, have shifted the power equilibrium between capital and labor in favor of the former, with union membership declining in many countries and economic inequalities surging (Harvey, 2005; Lazzarato, 2009).

With what has been described as a transition from *welfare to workfare* policies in the 1990s, many countries in the global North, including Sweden, attempted to reduce public spending by creating stronger incentives to work and by implementing “activating” labor market policies aimed at creating a more flexible labor force that can adapt to the demands of corporations (Finn, 2000; Clarke, 2005; Peralta Prieto, 2006). With slogans such as “no rights without responsibilities” and “any job is better than no job”, so-called welfare dependence was increasingly framed as a social problem with demoralizing and destructive consequences (Greer, 2016:163).

By deregulating the financial sector, neoliberal policies have furthermore pushed for rapid financialization. This has, since the 1970s, strongly weakened the power of the nation state to control and influence the flows of capital. During the 1990s, American companies started to make more profits on financial activities than on manufacturing and commodity production (Alfonsson, 2020:126), which clearly signaled a shift away from the hegemony of industrial production in the global North toward immaterial and cognitive forms of production (cf. Hardt & Negri, 2000). The profound effects of financialization have arguably become even more apparent after the economic crises of 2007–2008, after which the logics of finance have “come to

superimpose themselves on and dominate other realms of economic activity and life” (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2019:136).

The combination of flexibilization, financialization, neoliberalism, and changed occupational structures has, according to Harvey (1990:150), resulted in a shrinking *core* of domestic workers with secure full-time employment and an expanding *periphery* of flexible and expandable workers dependent on the market, often selling their labor power on demand through temporary, non-standard contracts. This has undermined standard employment as a normative model by making non-standard forms of work — such as temporary, part-time, fixed-term, freelance, gig and solo self-employment — more common even among groups previously protected by the Fordist arrangements (see Rubery et al., 2018; Gauffin, 2020). The normalization of non-standard work allows companies to outsource responsibilities, risks, and costs to workers and to circumvent employment regulations and collective agreements (Thörnquist, 2011). Beck (2000:2) describes this as a transition from a Fordist work society of full employment to a new, risky “political economy of insecurity”, while Fleming (2017) calls it a “radical responsabilization” of the workforce.

Financialization entails a changed capitalist logic, where providing shareholder value becomes a leading principle and profits increasingly take the form of rent from productive processes outside direct corporate control (Arvidsson, 2020:30). This pushes for further rationalization of production as well as the outsourcing and flexibilization of labor (Jarrett, 2022a:15). Thompson (2003:367) argues that financialization has caused “successive waves of downsizing and layering as firms seek ways of cutting costs to improve financial performance”. Arguably, there is a structural antagonism between the short-term injunctions of finance capital and long-term employment stability, which is part of the explanation for the rise of today’s digital labor market. Norbäck and Styhre (2021:267) note that more capital to shareholders “means lower investment in production capital [...] and more insecure employment contracts and lower financial benefits for salaried workers”.

Financialization is also inseparable from the emergence of the internet and, later, public digital platforms. Before the dot-com boom of the late 1990s, the internet had been used for mostly non-commercial purposes or as part of corporate intranets (Arvidsson, 2020:80). After the computer boom and the spread of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s, the internet was soon increasingly commercialized and exposed to the logics of speculative finance capital. Srnicek (2017:20) writes that with the decline of American manufacture, finance capital instead started to favor the emerging telecoms sector with “the imperative for profit latched onto the possibilities afforded by getting people and businesses online”. For this purpose, enormous amounts of capital were poured into building an internet infrastructure and expanding it to mainstream audiences. Through the steady flow of venture capital, the foundations were laid for the speculative conditions that characterize today’s platform capitalism, where initial utopian beliefs in the democratic potential of digital communication have been replaced by far-reaching commercialization and surveillance (Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019; Arvidsson, 2020).

Contemporary notions like platform capitalism or digital capitalism draw attention to the new economic models at the heart of the contemporary mode of production, underpinned by vast infrastructures of information technologies, digital platforms, algorithmic systems, and extractive data networks (Srnicsek, 2017). As briefly discussed in chapter 1, digital platforms are, in a technological sense, often defined as infrastructures in the form of software applications or apps that intermediate the interactions of different user groups. In the economics literature, platforms are typically seen as multisided markets that connect users such as consumers, workers, employers, firms, and advertisers (Poell et al., 2022:6). As sociologists well know, neither infrastructures nor markets are however the neutral intermediators that they sometimes are portrayed as in public and economic discourses. Digital platforms are related to a range of political decisions by companies with economic stakes in how their platforms are designed and used.

While platform companies offer users communicative and creative possibilities, they also steer and nudge their interactions in various ways to extract information and data, from which they can produce surplus value, analyze user behavior, and chart and control user tastes. Platforms rely on so-called “network effects”, meaning that they become more valuable the more users they manage to attract to their platform (Srnicsek, 2017:45). Value is here not only extracted from employed labor but also from “free” user-labor (Terranova, 2004) or by exploiting the attention of users for advertising purposes (Zuboff, 2019). The *extraction* of value from user data has arguably become a new tendential paradigm of capital accumulation (Ekbia & Nardi, 2017; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2019). In Marxist terms, digital platforms function as “points of production” (cf. Gandini, 2019), where companies with often monopolistic ambitions aim to control and enclose the social interactions of users and to extract value from the commons they create through their social cooperation, networks, and communication (Delfanti & Arvidsson, 2019:118). Platforms in the gig economy have further accelerated the transition toward non-standard work by categorizing workers as independent contractors or self-employed rather than employees, thus rejecting employer responsibility (Woodcock & Graham, 2020).

## **Freelance work and solo self-employment in Sweden**

The Swedish labor market has also been affected by the trends described above, including the proliferation of non-standard forms of work. It is however important to place these developments within the context of the Swedish welfare state in order to understand the circumstances that shape the working life of digital freelancers and other non-standard workers.

Nordic welfare states like Sweden are often characterized as inclusive and generous, with egalitarian social security systems, high union density, and collective bargaining systems that regulate wage levels and working conditions (Rasmussen et al., 2019). While some argue that Nordic welfare states are comparatively well prepared to deal with future challenges to working life (Dølvik & Steen, 2018), the

fact that they are built around standard employment as a norm nonetheless means that they are not fully equipped to deal with the risks of non-standard forms of work, such as digital freelancing careers (cf. Larsen & Ilsøe, 2021).

The institutionalization of the standard employment relationship in Sweden must be seen in relation to the consolidation of social democratic hegemony in the post-war years and the establishment of the “Swedish model” of industrial relations which, from the 1930s onwards, has emphasized mutual recognition and self-determination between capital and labor as the main parties to compromise and negotiate on the labor market (Kjellberg, 2017). This model is characterized by the peaceful and consensus-oriented negotiation of collective agreements by the main parties (the labor unions and the employer associations), without the interference of the state through, for instance, legislation. The centrality of this model means that labor laws and systems for welfare, taxation, and social security are “built on the assumption of permanent full-time employment rather than short-term contracts and self-employment” (Movitz & Sandberg, 2009:252). A report by Eurofound (2017) shows that the Nordic welfare systems are generally more inclusive for self-employed and other non-standard workers than other European systems. Nevertheless, although the Swedish and Nordic labor markets offer comparably high wage levels and social protection, non-standard workers can have difficulties accessing various welfare services that are designed for employees with permanent contracts (Hedenus & Nergaard, 2021; Bucht, 2022).

Many freelancers have trouble accessing unemployment benefits, which produces uncertainty in the inevitable periods between jobs. According to the Swedish law of unemployment insurance, the determining factor for whether a worker has the right to unemployment benefits is their status as either an employee or a business owner. For freelancers and independent contractors who work irregularly for several clients, the deciding factor is whether the contractor is seen as dependent on their client(s) or not. However, one report (Inspektionen för arbetslöshetsförsäkringen, 2016) finds that all the unemployment insurance funds report difficulties making this classification and that the evaluation is made even more difficult by the increased popularity of umbrella companies. Freelancers who are classified as business owners do not have access to unemployment benefits when they are in between jobs. In order to gain access, they have to close down their business and make themselves “available” to the labor market (Norbäck & Styhre, 2019).

The Swedish social security systems are in turn based on taxed income and do not make any formal distinction between employment and self-employment. Nevertheless, freelancers and solo self-employed face what Norbäck and Styhre (2019:8) call an “uncertainty penalty” in relation to these systems. As they are not covered by the Employment Protection Act (LAS) and collective agreements, they are neither protected against arbitrary dismissal, nor entitled to any minimum income or minimum of compensated hours, even when working full-time. This creates uncertainty regarding immediate earnings — freelancers generally have low earnings compared to employees — and gives lower compensations for benefits like

sick pay, parental allowance, and pensions than what most employees have. In 2010, self-employed workers on average had 22% lower lifetime incomes than employees at the age of retirement. Furthermore, by the age of 69, a total of 52% of the self-employed were still working, compared to 12% of the employees (SCB, 2017).

Even though freelancers in principle have the same right to go on paid paternal leave as employees (the level is based on their taxed income), this is associated with problems such as losing clients if they are away from the market for extended periods (Norbäck & Styhre, 2019). Furthermore, freelancers miss out on benefits and social expenses otherwise paid for by the employer, such as occupational pension, paid vacation, and sick leave. According to the Swedish Pensions Agency, one out of four self-employed workers worry about their future pension. Only 59% of the sole traders report they put away money for their pension, and 44% reported that they are able to take salaries according to market standards (Pensionsmyndigheten, 2018). Moreover, freelancers are not protected by employment regulations against discrimination. A union report on the communication industries finds that forms of discrimination, such as sexual harassment, is more common among self-employed workers than employees, particularly among women (Bucht, 2019).

Measuring how many are engaged in non-standard work is difficult, especially given that the category bridges self-employment, umbrella employment, hybrid employment, and novel forms of platform work. According to Berglund et al. (2021:61), in 2015, a total of 26% of the Swedish workforce was composed of non-standard workers, either as solo self-employed or employed on part-time or fixed-term contracts. Another study by the McKinsey Global Institute (Manyika et al., 2016:2pp) carried out in the United States and five European countries, finds that between 20% and 30% of the workers in these countries work under independent contracts. They estimate that in the European countries they surveyed (the United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden, Spain, and France), the independent workforce contains up to 62 million people, although more than half of those workers use it as a supplement to other earnings. The study also estimates that there are more than 160 million independent workers in all of Europe and the United States.

The self-employed are among the most rapidly expanding groups of workers in Sweden. In Sweden, levels of self-employment were internationally low before 1980, but between 1980 and 1999, the rate of self-employment doubled (Thörnquist, 2011:106). From 2005 to 2015, the self-employed increased in absolute numbers, increasing from around 700 000 people to around 900 000 (Wingborg, 2017:5).<sup>3</sup> Thörnquist (2011:107) argues that increases in self-employment are driven both by greater demand for high-skilled labor from consultants and freelancers in the

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<sup>3</sup> This figure includes both those who pay “F-tax” (with self-employment as their main occupation) and “FA-tax” (who have their own company but who also receive part of their income through regular employment).

knowledge and communication industries, and by processes of subcontracting in both private and public sectors to low and medium-skilled workers.

Larsen and Ilsøe (2021:26) find that the number of solo self-employed workers in Sweden has been relatively stable between 2000 and 2015, including around 6% of the total workforce in 2015. However, they note (2021:17) that many forms of non-standard work are not systematically covered in register data and surveys, which means that they tend to be underestimated in contemporary statistics. Furthermore, the large decline of self-employment within the agriculture and forestry sectors since the 1970s affects the overall numbers and might conceal increases in other sectors (Therborn, 2021:96). Berglund et al. (2021:63p) find that the groups most likely to be solo self-employed in Sweden are “men, people over the age of 65, students, people with more than one job, people born in Europe outside the Nordic countries, and people without children living at home”. Many solo self-employed are low-skilled, and quite a few supplement their income with other jobs (Larsen & Ilsøe, 2021:29)

Berglund et al. (2021) categorize art and entertainment as one of three sectors where solo self-employment is most common in Sweden. Larsen and Ilsøe (2021:26) find that the solo self-employed constitute 17% of the workforce in the creative industries. A report by the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (Tillväxtverket, 2019) shows that, in 2016, there were 187 000 people working within the creative and cultural industries, divided over 130 000 companies. As these numbers indicate, the majority of companies have few or no employees: 81% are solo companies without any employees at all, while 17% have 1–9 employees. The proportion of solo companies in the Swedish cultural sectors has been increasing throughout the 2000s. Companies in the cultural sector are less bound geographically due to their production of immaterial goods and their larger reliance on digital technologies for marketing, production, and distribution, and thus more companies export their products outside of Sweden than in other sectors (31%, compared to 17% overall) (Tillväxtverket, 2019:13p). One governmental report states that artistic and cultural work are at the forefront of the tendential development in Sweden toward digital work on a project and gig basis (SOU, 2018:23). All this points to the cultural and creative sectors as an interesting case for studying how precarious work is lived with and negotiated.

These developments are also visible in relation to umbrella organizations, which are a rapidly expanding phenomenon in Sweden. As briefly discussed in chapter 1, for a fee, umbrella organizations handle the freelancers’ administrative duties such as invoicing and paying taxes and social expenses. They also formally assume employer responsibility and describe their contractors (Swe: *egenanställda*) as employees who independently negotiate with task-givers on behalf of the umbrella organization. This view has however been criticized. *Egenanställda* exist in a gray zone between employment and self-employment (Wingborg, 2017; SOU, 2017:24). They are like all solo self-employed practically responsible for finding and securing clients and income streams, as well as upholding relations with existing ones, and

so on. Furthermore, compared to regular employers, umbrella companies have little to no influence over pay, number of billed hours, or how work is carried out and can guarantee freelancers no minimum or stable income (Hedenus & Nergaard, 2021:143). Hotvedt and Videb (2019:12) describe them as having “artificial employment contracts”, by which they only take on a limited number of responsibilities while avoiding “key employer functions, such as the obligation to provide work and pay or managerial prerogatives”.

Umbrella companies are more established in Sweden than in other Nordic countries. Freelance companies began emerging in Sweden already in the early 1990s but have since grown rapidly, particularly after 2010 with the introduction of general temporary employment in the Employment Protection Act (Wingborg, 2017:10; Hedenus & Nergaard, 2021). There were around 18 500 registered umbrella contractors in 2015 (Wingborg, 2017) and 34 000 in 2016 (Therborn, 2021:96), a number that is likely larger today. Umbrella employment is most common in culture, media, and design, as well as the IT sector, but many combine umbrella employment with regular employment or studies (SOU, 2017:24 p. 168; Wingborg, 2017:13).

## Digital freelancers: Precarious workers or entrepreneurs?

The trends and processes described above have normalized non-standard work and made the labor market more precarious for many groups of workers. Digital freelancers epitomize many of these shifts, showing that precarious work — often equated with so-called low-skilled work — also has very tangible effects on skilled, white-collar workers (cf. Norbäck, 2021b). At the same time, they also embody another set of trends that has emerged with neoliberal culture, through which entrepreneurialism has been celebrated as a solution to many social problems.

The development of a remote freelance economy predates today’s gig economy and can, in particular, be traced back to the development of portfolio careers in the information and knowledge economy in the 1990s (Gandini, 2016).<sup>4</sup> So-called knowledge work is assumed to draw on the cognitive and intellectual skills of workers. For management, this makes it difficult to standardize work through direct control. Instead, it becomes important to influence the behavior of workers by regulating identities, values, and ideas, and to allow large amounts of self-organization (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009). In the 1990s, management gurus like Tom Peters proposed that employers should also approach their employees as micro-enterprises (see Fleming, 2017). Furthermore, as knowledge and immaterial skills were not assumed to be stored in organizations but in individuals, the knowledge-based economies have been framed as giving individuals new

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<sup>4</sup> Freelance work as such can be traced several centuries back; see, for instance, Cohen (2016).



opportunities to independently capitalize on their own skills, experiences, and knowledge by selling them on a project and contract basis, marketing their personal portfolios, and drawing on their human capital as solo self-employed workers or freelancers (Barley & Kunda, 2006; Collin, 2011; Gandini, 2016).

The new economy was initially praised by many optimistic commentators who hoped that these transformations of the labor market would bring about a new, liberating working life. Within the management and business literature in the 1990s, commentators like Malone and Laubacher (1998:np) hailed what they saw as the emergence of an “e-lance economy”, where “electronically connected freelancers — e-lancers — join together into fluid and temporary networks to produce and sell goods and services”. Others saw the emergence of “boundaryless careers” or “portfolio careers” that would allow workers to operate as “free agents” on the labor market by marketing themselves and their skills online and taking on clients and projects as they see fit (Peters, 1997; Pink, 2002; Florida, 2002; Platman, 2004).

These early positive narratives have since been challenged by more nuanced research emphasizing the often ambivalent and conflicted nature of market-mediated freelance work in creative, cultural, and knowledge sectors (e.g., Barley & Kunda, 2006; Cohen, 2012, 2016; Gandini, 2016a, 2016b, Norbäck, 2021a, 2022). ‘Free’-lancers, boundaryless careers, and portfolio workers are concepts that all point to the dissolution of stable career trajectories toward more fluid, flexible, and precarious careers, where individual success must be secured by taking responsibility for and managing one’s own career and competences (O’Mahony & Bechky, 2006). Portfolio careers are thus not necessarily a sign of an increasingly autonomous and flexible workforce but rather a “coping strategy to deal with work made intermittent and precarious” (Cohen 2012:143).

Previous research has shown that, for the freelance workforce, enterprising skills — networking, enhancing one’s employability, continuously re-educating oneself, and improving professional skills and knowledge — are essential for upholding a career (Barley & Kunda, 2006; Gandini, 2016; Norbäck, 2022). Furthermore, these careers put major emphasis on social, affective, and collaborative skills, which also have become targets for valorization processes today (cf. Delfanti & Arvidsson, 2019:126). Social media platforms in particular facilitate what has been described in terms of “network sociality” (Wittel, 2001) or “compulsory socializing” (Cockayne, 2016), which turns social relations into vehicles for informational exchange and instrumental ties. This mode of sociality requires that individuals develop new technical and social skills, devise new strategies, and manage their professional relations and self-presentation in “digitally supported networks” (Chambers, 2016:28). Sociality here both becomes an instrumental necessity for building networks, social capital, and reputation, and a resource that in itself is productive by creating shared knowledge commons that can be valorized (Arvidsson, 2014; Gandini, 2016). The importance of social capital and professional networks have been shown to have exclusionary effects, disadvantaging women, ethnic minorities, and those from the working class (Grugulis & Stoyanova, 2012).

While the concept of *freelancer* emphasizes the freedom of being solo self-employed, Cohen (2016:117) argues in her study of freelance journalists in Canada that the freedom and autonomy they enjoy best can be described as “micro-autonomy” — the “experience of strategically navigating conditions over which one has little or no control”. While freelance work can be liberating for those who have high bargaining power and the ability to set the terms and prices for their work, for many others, it creates dependence, insecurity, and individualized responsibility to social problems (Fleming, 2017). Freelance work represents a “complicated version of freedom” (cf. Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011), where passion and desire for autonomy often coalesce with excessive amounts of overwork, emotional labor, and self-exploitation.

The next two sections focus on *precarization* and *entrepreneurialization* as two parallel processes against which digital freelancing must be understood.

## **The precarization of the labor market**

Variations on precarity (precarious work, precarization, precariousness, the precariat, etc.) have become important yet ambiguous concepts for understanding what shifts toward non-standard work mean for various groups of workers. Millar (2017:2) observes that “precarity now seems to be everywhere” in the academic literature, where the concept is used to describe both a “labor condition, a class identity, an ontological experience of human existence, a generalized state of the world”. Precarity is thus not necessarily used solely in relation to work. Butler (2004), for instance, uses *precariousness* to describe an existential and universal condition of co-dependency, and for Berlant (2011:192), precarity is more akin to an “affective atmosphere” permeating neoliberal culture.

Although Larsen and Ilsøe (2021:16) state that notions like precarious employment and the precariat have been imported to the Nordic context from Anglo-Saxon literature, these concepts have a complex history. This is partly due to the duality in the concept of precarity, as it is both an academic concept and a political concept used in both activist settings and social movements. Prior to becoming popularized in the academic literature by British authors like Standing (2011), who saw the formation of the *precariat* — a new “dangerous” class of workers unified by insecure working conditions — the notion was used as a platform for the European precarity movement and the May Day protests of the early 2000s in Europe (De Sario, 2007; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). There, the concept was used as a way of imagining new political subjects and modes of collective organization. Alberti et al. (2018:448) write that already in the 1970s precarity was adopted by “leftist movements in continental Europe, as a means of rallying (often) young workers excluded from stable jobs”, and that the roots of the concept therefore are to be found in political organizing and mobilization, particularly in Italy and France.

As an academic concept, some credit for the notion of precarity or *précarité* goes to Bourdieu's (1963) early study of Algerian underemployed workers (see Millar, 2017; Alberti et al., 2018:448). However, the concept goes even further back than that. Quinlan (2012) notes that the term "precarious employment" was already being used in the early 19th century in both Great Britain and Australia to describe irregular, casualized, and poorly paid work. The concept can also be traced to Marxist theory. In *The Communist Manifesto*, for instance, we can read that "the growing competition among the bourgeois, and the resulting commercial crises, make the wages of the workers ever more fluctuating. The increasing improvement of machinery, ever more rapidly developing, makes their livelihood more and more precarious" (Marx & Engels, 2015:15). Precarious work is here related to the impoverishment of the working class and the growth of an industrial reserve army, already pointing to dimensions that we today associate with precarious work such as insecurity, instability, and economic disadvantage.

In sociological labor research, *precarious work* usually describes how working life has become more insecure and vulnerable. Kalleberg and Vallas (2017:1) define it as work that is "uncertain, unstable, and insecure and in which employees bear the risks (as opposed to businesses or the government) and receive limited social benefits and statutory protections". As such, the concept describes the "stable instability of employment relationships" (Heidkamp & Kergel, 2017:10), which is the backside of flexible capitalism. Precarious work tends to be more disconnected from welfare systems than standard employment, temporally and spatially fragmented, and usually offers little in terms of career opportunities and wage development (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Pulignano & Morgan, 2022).

Precarious work also carries moral connotations, often describing a new "abnormal" condition that has disrupted supposedly stable Fordist work (Mitropoulos, 2005). Hewison and Kalleberg emphasize that "precarious work is changing not just the way people work but also the way that they live" (2013:396) by dismantling old occupational identities and social relations and generating insecurity on social, economic, and existential levels. Sociologists like Sennett (2000; 2007) and Bauman (2000) have also argued that precarity has not only objective but also subjective consequences, corroding occupational identities and everyday life.

Others have problematized the view of standard employment as a normative form of employment that has been disrupted by precarity by pointing out that the relatively secure employment under Fordism is the exception when viewed in a historical context (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008; Stanford, 2017). Mitropoulos (2005:3) writes that "on a global scale and in its privatised and/or unpaid versions, precarity is and has always been the standard experience of work in capitalism" for the majority of workers. As Vosko (2011) notes, even during the heyday of Fordism, standard employment was primarily available to white male workers within certain sectors, while many women, immigrants, non-citizens, and young people were excluded from it. Non-standard work always co-existed with standard employment

(Larsen & Ilsøe, 2021:19), which makes it important to not romanticize work in the Fordist era.

While precarious labor is no new phenomenon, the decline of standard employment should not be mistaken for a historical regression “to some pre-Fordist status quo ante” (Ross, 2009:3). Today’s world of work needs to be understood on its own terms. As Woodcock and Graham (2020:19) write in relation to the gig economy, while the precariousness of this work is not new, the gig economy reorganizes precarious work into new forms. Berardi similarly argues that “the new phenomenon is not the precarious character of the job market, but the technical and cultural conditions in which info-labor is made precarious” (2010:32).

Both objective factors and subjective experiences of precarity importantly vary between different contexts and working segments (Choonara et al., 2022). Neilson and Rossiter (2008:65) warn not to “merge or sew together experiences of contingency, vulnerability, and risk across different historical periods and geographical spaces”. Precarity can be said to exist “on a spectrum”, where the degree of precarity is determined by factors such as marketplace bargaining power, the form of economic remuneration, and one’s general life situation (Norbäck & Styhre, 2021:266). Precarization also produces difference and fragmentation in the workforce according to dimensions such as class, gender, race, and ethnicity (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; de los Reyes, 2017). For instance, women, foreign workers, young people, students, and those older than 65 years tend to be overrepresented in the category of non-standard workers in the Nordics, although different patterns are visible in different forms of non-standard work (Larsen & Ilsøe, 2021:27).

Scholars have called for more research that maps out the nuances of what precarious work means and how it is experienced in different contexts and among different groups of workers (Alberti et al., 2018; Norbäck & Styhre, 2021; Choonara et al., 2022). This is what I aim to do in relation to Swedish digital freelancers. One factor that is particularly interesting about this group is how they relate to precarious employment compared to other groups of non-standard workers. Berglund et al. (2021:64) find that 70% of temporary employees in Sweden report that they are so involuntarily. In contrast, as mentioned in chapter 1, a report by Eurofound (2017:11) shows that 86% of the solo self-employed in Sweden state that they are self-employed *by choice*, and 98% state that they enjoy being their own boss. These are the highest numbers in all of the EU. Despite industrial restructurings that have made this form of employment more prominent, the view of this group as one on which precarious employment is imposed is complicated. While solo self-employment, as we saw in the last section, is objectively lacking many of the safety nets that pertain to employees, they still largely seem to understand their form of employment as self-chosen.

## Entrepreneurialization, marketization, and enterprising selves

If precarization is a process that largely carries negative connotations, another process shaping the labor market with more distinctively positive connotations is *entrepreneurialization*. I argue it is important not to approach entrepreneurialization and precarization as contradictory logics but rather see them as two sides of the same coin. Entrepreneurialism has, for many workers, become a necessary strategy for managing one's career in a precarious labor market. In turn, entrepreneurialism fuels a condition where economic and social risks are transferred from organizations and states to individuals, contributing to what Fleming (2017) has called a "radical responsabilization" of the workforce or to the formation of an "entreprenariat" (Lorusso, 2019) of "precarious-enterprise workers" (Armano et al., 2022:30).

During the last decades, entrepreneurship has been presented as the solution to a range of social and economic problems in countries of the global North (Bröckling, 2016; Lorusso, 2019). Although the entrepreneur as a heroic and disruptive figure has long been part of the mythological imaginary of capitalism, entrepreneurial ideologies have become more dominant during the last decades in relation to neoliberalism, financialization, and increasingly hegemonic "discourses of risk-taking, self-management and self-fulfillment" (van der Zwan, 2014:112).

Entrepreneurialization is a process that is not only economic but also cultural, as it has reshaped public opinion, values, and subjectivities. In particular, this has been traced to the rise of an "enterprise culture" in Great Britain in the wake of Margaret Thatcher. Du Gay (1996:56) describes enterprise culture as having restructured many institutions and activities in line with commercial enterprises and where "certain enterprising qualities – such as self-reliance, personal responsibility, boldness and a willingness to take risks in the pursuit of goals – are regarded as human virtues and promoted as such". In the United States, researchers like Neff (2012) have explored how entrepreneurial frames, through which economic risks are understood as an individual rather than collective responsibility, have also been disseminated to employed workers in the IT sector. Neff calls this *venture labor* to describe how risk-heavy work is transmitted to workers for the benefit of the employers. She shows how an entrepreneurial ethos and risk-taking is not restricted to "actual" entrepreneurs but has also trickled down to many employees.

In Sweden, the cultural status of entrepreneurship and self-employment has throughout the 1900s been ambivalent. As we have seen, Sweden has long been considered something of an ideal example of a collectivist social democratic welfare state, which, according to Esping-Andersen (1990), has strived to "de-commodify" workers by making them less dependent on the market. Yet, while the arrangements of the Swedish model are still relatively intact, Sweden has since the 1980s been heavily shaped by extensive privatization and marketization (Suhonen et al., 2021). With this, the imaginaries of entrepreneurship and self-employment have also changed. This makes it an interesting setting for studying entrepreneurial discourses

and subjectivities, as this is a “setting in which entrepreneurial subjectivity would arguably have less fertile soil in which to grow” (Norbäck, 2021b:3).

Since joining the EU in 1995, Sweden has implemented a liberal activating employment policy that promotes entrepreneurship and individual responsibility (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004). With the shift described earlier from welfare to workfare policies, employability became a keyword in both Swedish national policies and the policies of the EU and OECD. The unemployed were now rebranded as “job seekers”, a discursive shift which emphasized the importance of individuals becoming employable on their own rather than expecting help from the state (Fogde, 2009; Karlsson, 2019). Helping individuals enhance their employability was characterized as a way to empower the unemployed to take control over their own lives through self-responsibility and self-entrepreneurship. The entrepreneurial logics of investing in oneself and one’s human capital were increasingly imposed on citizens far outside of those we typically associate with entrepreneurship. In line with this, the Swedish government has since the 1990s and 2000s increased incentives for people to start their own companies through tax relief reforms, start-up grants, and education about entrepreneurship (Thörnquist, 2011:107).

A recent anthology (Andersson et al., 2023) examines from different perspectives how the market has become a central organizing principle in Sweden. In the introduction, the editors (Andersson et al., 2023:15pp) state that, particularly in relation to welfare institutions, the marketization of Sweden seems to have gone further than in any other Nordic country. However, they argue that this should not only be traced to particular reforms during the 1980s and 1990s, as the work and social engineering of transforming attitudes, ideas, values, and subjectivities started earlier than that. Today, training in entrepreneurship is promoted through the Swedish school system. Since 2011, the national curricula of both elementary and upper secondary schools in Sweden “state that education should give pupils the possibility to develop an approach that promotes entrepreneurship” (Åström Rudberg, 2023b:1067).

This development may seem at odds with the Sweden of the early 1980s, dominated by large industries and state monopolies. Yet, Åström Rudberg (2023a, 2023b) argues that, since the 1970s and even earlier, there have been many ideological struggles over shaping the ideas and values of youth. She shows how, through a range of campaigns since the 1970s, Swedish industry and neoliberal lobbyist organizations have attempted to shape the attitudes of youth to promote ideas of entrepreneurship, self-realization, and self-responsibility rather than collectivist beliefs in the welfare state. Although these ideas largely came from the political right, Åström Rudberg (2023a:82p) argues that they also find roots in the leftist counter-culture of the 1960s, which promoted specific individualist conceptions of freedom and autonomy, along with a critique against large capitalist corporations. These ideas in the 1980s fed into the emerging neoliberal turn and the spread of non-standard work.

The writings of other authors also support the view that flexible and entrepreneurial labor was not solely imposed by capital and the state, but that it has also been a response to actual demands from the youth-led counterculture and from disaffected workers. Writers within the autonomist Marxist tradition (e.g., Hardt & Negri, 2000; Berardi, 2009) have argued that flexibilization was largely a response by capital to the demands of disaffected industrial workers who demanded less rigid and alienating work. Mitropoulos (2005:1) writes that “the flight from ‘standard hours’ was not precipitated by employers but rather by workers seeking less time at work”. As similarly expressed by de Peuter (2014:265), “One-time oppositional impulses – to escape the routines of standard employment, to avert the Taylorized rhythms of the factory [...] came to be accommodated by and increasingly generic to capitalism” and that the “spread of nonstandard, creative work under post-Fordism demonstrates capital’s remarkable capacity to absorb, adapt to, and thrive off desires opposing it”.

This is similar to the famous thesis of Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), who argue that the response of capital to the 1968 movement gave rise to a “new spirit of capitalism”. In their take, this spirit — meaning the ideology and “set of beliefs associated with the capitalist order that helps to justify this order and [...] to sustain the forms of action and predispositions compatible with it” (2005:8) — co-opted what they call the cultural critique against industrial capitalism as a source of alienation and disenchantment by offering flexible but increasingly precarious work as a “solution” to demands for more meaningful work. According to Boltanski and Chiapello (2005:70pp), the new spirit of capitalism incorporates this critique into its organizational principles: Organizations are meant to adapt a network structure to become flexible; wage laborers should become self-employed to increase autonomy; work should be structured in teams or projects; and workers should mobilize by promises of self-fulfilling and creative work, through which they can develop not only professionally but also as persons. Job security has, according to Boltanski and Chiapello (2005:90pp), been turned into an individual problem to be solved through project-based careers and individual entrepreneurship.

Governmentality studies have also explored how neoliberal rationalities of enterprise have penetrated the fabric of society in a range of different settings and contexts, shaping particular “enterprising selves” who understand themselves in relation to the market (Du Gay, 1996; Rose, 1999; Brown, 2005; Miller & Rose, 2008; Bröckling, 2016). More often than not, these studies have been conducted through the textual analysis of materials such as social policy, labor market reforms, school curricula, or psychological treatment programs. It has less often explored the concrete situated experiences of workers in negotiating these discourses. Exceptions include Scharff’s (2016) study on how the subjective psychic life of neoliberalism is lived out by female classical musicians, Moisander et al.’s (2018) study of dependent self-employed workers, Norbäck’s (2021a, 2021b) studies of how freelance journalists form their subjectivities, and Vallas and Christin’s (2018) study of worker responses to personal branding discourses.

Scharff (2016) argues that the musicians she studies internalize neoliberal competition and direct it toward the self. The musicians take risks upon themselves, push themselves to self-optimize and be constantly active, and adapt positive and optimistic outlooks to deal with failures and insecurities as individual rather than structural problems, which produces anxiety and self-doubt. Norbäck similarly (2021b) finds that Swedish freelance journalists are driven by an ideal of freedom, but this makes them constantly available and accommodating to clients, thus blurring the boundaries between work and non-work, all while hiding feelings of insecurity and failure. However, she finds in another study (Norbäck, 2021a) various strategies of resistance among freelancers for dealing with imposed entrepreneurial subjectivities. For instance, they might try to build supportive communities among themselves, engage in practices of work reduction or work refusal, reduce the quality of the works they produce to avoid exploitation and overwork, or attempt to quit freelance journalism altogether.

## Freelancing in the cultural industries

Having traced some of the major transformations on the labor market toward both more precarious and entrepreneurial forms of work, I now turn to how these shifts have affected work in the cultural industries.

### The “creative economy” as post-Fordist sector

With post-Fordist transitions from industrial production to new sectors, the cultural industries found themselves being marketed as important sectors of growth and employment. This represents a larger shift that already C.W. Mills (1951:166) observed in relation to the rise of white-collar work, meaning that “fewer individuals manipulate *things*, more handle *people* and *symbols*”. More recently, this has been described as a shift toward immaterial and cognitive forms of production, where value is increasingly generated through the valorization of immaterial, cognitive, and informational commodities, and services such as culture, brands, knowledge, advertising, communication, and information (Moulier Boutang, 2011; Fumagalli et al., 2019). Traditional industries have also become increasingly reliant on informational labor processes, and the value of material goods has become intertwined with financial assets and brands (Jarrett, 2022a).

Culture and commerce have often formed an uneasy relation historically. Hesmondhalgh and Pratt (2005:3) note that oftentimes “the cultural industries were the ‘other’ against which cultural policy reacted, in the shape of arts subsidies, but also in the formation of public service broadcasting in some countries”. Cultural policy has often had the dual purpose of democratizing art by making it available to more people and upholding the exclusivity of “high culture” through directed



subsidies (see also Pratt, 2005). In Sweden, the ambition to “counteract the negative effects of the commercialization of culture” was an explicit goal of the cultural political reform of 1974. Since then, Sweden has had a decentralized cultural policy which has aimed to distribute cultural and artistic resources equally to all citizens (Blomgren, 2008; Renko et al., 2020:5).

The *culture industry* concept originates from the critical theory of Adorno and Horkheimer (1997/1944). For them, the juxtaposition of “culture” and “industry” represented a dialectical paradox: Through the combination of two seemingly contradictory words, their connotations were radically reconfigured to expose the tensions within industrial capitalism. Adorno and Horkheimer spoke of a singular industry to designate how culture became a commodity among others, mass-produced and standardized according to pre-configured formulas in order to appeal to — and passivize — as many consumers as possible. Their focus was on the “affirmative” character of mass-produced culture (see also Marcuse, 2009) as an ideological tool for integrating consumers in bourgeois industrial society and the wage labor relation.

The status of the cultural industries changed in the 1980s and 1990s. The transition to flexible modes of production was coupled with postmodern critiques of boundaries between “high” and “low” culture. If culture before was often equated with art, the culture concept was now broadened (Bjurström et al., 2013:21). This occurred in combination with a strongly intensified commercialization of cultural production, the emergence of a strongly brand-driven consumer culture, and the culturalization and aestheticization of production itself (Jameson, 1991; Lash & Urry, 1994; Arvidsson, 2005). Through new discourses and policies, culture and creativity increasingly came to be seen as central for reinvigorating so-called post-industrial economies. As a result, the cultural industries were rebranded as *creative industries*. Around this time, influential books emerged, such as Florida’s *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), Caves’ *Creative Industries* (2000), and Leadbeater’s *Living on Thin Air* (1999), where the creative economy and the creative class were enthusiastically celebrated both for bringing about a new world of creative and fulfilling work, and for bringing growth and prosperity to post-industrial cities.

The creative industries concept implied both an economization of culture (cf. Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997) and a culturalization of the economy (Du Gay & Pryke, 2002). While countries all over the world adapted the policies of creative industries during the 1990s and 2000s, this shift is most associated with the New Labour governments in the United Kingdom, led by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown (Flew, 2012; Ross, 2009). In 1998, the British Department of Culture, Media and Sport released the influential first *Creative Industries Mapping Document* (DCMS, 1998; followed by a second document in 2001), which framed the creative industries as an essential sector for economic growth, development, and job creation in globalized economies increasingly dependent on immaterial services and commodities (Pratt, 2005; Garnham, 2005). In these documents, the creative industries were defined as “those industries which have their origin in individual

creativity, skill, and talent and which have the potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property” (DCMS, 2001). In this definition, creative industries include not only traditional cultural and artistic sectors but also commercial sectors like advertising, antiques, architecture, fashion, broadcasting, video games, and computer software. On this basis, it was argued that the creative industries constituted the fastest growing and third-largest economic sector in the United Kingdom, employing more than 1.3 million people (DCMS, 2001; Hutter, 2011).

The British mapping documents point out the need of ensuring “a long-term supply of creative talent” by educating and “stimulating creativity and innovation in young people”, by “ensuring that people have both the creative and business skills necessary to succeed”, and by promoting intellectual property rights (DCMS, 2001:13). Cultural production is thus directly linked to neoliberal theories emphasizing the importance of entrepreneurship, innovation, and the development of human capital. It also connects cultural policy with the development of ICTs (information and communication technologies), digitalization, and various theories of knowledge capitalism and the information society. Garnham (2005:26) argues that “the term ‘creative’ was chosen so that the whole of the computer software sector could be included. Only on this basis was it possible to make the claims about size and growth stand up”. Crucially, the creative industries concept is thus entangled with discourses around digitalization, ICTs, and entrepreneurship. As Jarrett (2022a:128pp) also argues, the discourses around creativity have become strongly integrated in the tech sectors and financial startups, where they are entangled with ideas of creative disruption and innovation.

A similar rhetoric emerged in the early 2000s in Sweden, when concepts like the *creative industries* and the *experience economy* became dominant. Bille (2012) finds that talk in the Nordics of an experience economy in particular has seldom been clearly defined but that it seems to draw on three inspirations: the first British DCMS documents, Pine and Gilmore’s book *The Experience Economy* (1999), and Florida’s (2002) ideas of the “creative class”. These shifts toward viewing creativity as increasingly important for growth, innovation, and job creation are seen in policies on the regional and local level, which have promoted investments and entrepreneurship in sectors ranging from cinema to fashion, marketing, design, computer games, and tourism (Blomgren, 2008; Bjurström et al., 2013:33). These initiatives have often been carried out in cooperation with actors from the business sectors rather than traditional cultural institutions. As Lindqvist (2023:19) argues, they have often been motivated by linking culture and creativity to ideas of innovation, entrepreneurship, and technological development. In particular, Lindqvist (2023:31) notes that the economic potential of these sectors has been linked to the exploitation of immaterial property rights.

Lindqvist (2023:36pp) presents a useful timeline for the Swedish policies during the last decade. In 2009, the conservative–liberal government introduced a national action plan for the cultural and creative sectors (*kulturella och kreativa näringar*),

launched jointly by the minister of culture and the minister of business and industry. The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (*Tillväxtverket*) was appointed a key role in implementing the plan, pointing to the close relation between the economic and cultural sectors. After the 2014 election, the new social democratic government did not present a new national plan, but Tillväxtverket continued to financially support the implementation of these policies regionally between 2013 and 2018. The cultural and creative sectors were hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, to which the government largely reacted in terms of implementing crisis support to organizations, small businesses, and the self-employed, many of whom more or less had their businesses closed down. During and after the pandemic, different initiatives and investigations have been launched into how to help the cultural and creative sectors get back on their feet and how to establish more permanent support systems for cultural workers, often working on a gig basis outside the protection of the Swedish social security systems.

Although the most hyperbolic celebratory buzz surrounding the creative industries might have died down in the context of state policies today, the blurred boundaries between concepts like culture, creativity, and economy lives on. Furthermore, as researchers have pointed out in relation to the growth of digital media, discourses around creativity are still important in shaping contemporary experiences of work by marketing flexible, non-standard work, gig work, and solo self-employment as attractive, particularly to young people of the aspirational middle classes (Bröckling, 2016).

As briefly pointed out in the introduction, some researchers have identified creative work as a model for the new labor market. Jarrett (2022a:127) argues that by being both self-employed and engaged in irregular work, as well as being “involved in romanticized, ‘cool’ work that is associated with self-expression, freedom and [...] passion”, creative workers have also come to serve as the basis for the contemporary “archetype of the industrious entrepreneur”. The hybrid figure of the “cultural entrepreneur” epitomizes these shifts and has, for some, become a new heroic figure in the post-Fordist landscape (Bjurström et al., 2013:68). McRobbie (2016a:35) reflects that “the creative workforce may be relatively small, but it is being trained up to pave the way for a new post-welfare era”. It is precisely in this vein that I approach digital freelancing in the cultural industries as an interesting tendential case for studying the dispersion of non-standard, precarious, and atypical careers of freelance work, as well as immaterial and communicative forms of labor throughout society. In the following section, I turn to the characteristics of this work.

## **Characteristics of cultural work**

Just as the cultural industries have gone from being relatively peripheral sectors to becoming centers of economic activity during the 2000s, cultural labor was until relatively recently something of an anomaly within sociological research on work,

seldom taken seriously as “real” productive activity. Hesmondhalgh (2010:267) notes that while the cultural industries have been subject to much research, “until recently, only a very small proportion of these studies focused on the creative labour that is fundamental to this realm of production”.

While discourses around creativity are important for understanding how work in the cultural industries increasingly intersect with entrepreneurial logics, cultural labor is arguably preferable as an analytical concept. This is partly to avoid the reification of neoliberal creative industries discourses. As Pratt (2005:33) also argues, the notion of creativity has “little analytical value per se; it would be difficult to identify a non-creative industry or activity”. Given this, creative labor and creative industries are concepts so broad that they risk becoming meaningless (see also Gill & Pratt, 2008; McGuigan, 2010). Furthermore, where creative labor carries romantic connotations that draw attention to the personal talents or even “genius” of specific individuals, cultural labor more easily translates to a sociological focus on the labor of cultural, communicative, and symbolic production. This is not to imply that “cultural” is an adjective without ambiguity. Culture is a notoriously complex word, with Raymond Williams (2014:49) famously calling it “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language”.

Two of the major sociological traditions for studying cultural and artistic production derives from Bourdieu’s studies on artistic fields (1984; 1996) and Becker’s work on *Art Worlds* (2008). Both these traditions have proved influential in decentering the artistic “genius” and re-socializing the artist by emphasizing the social, cooperative, and competitive nature of cultural production. Yet, cultural *labor* is not the main focus of these traditions. Within the sociology of work more specifically, reasons for the lack of interest in cultural labor might be found in the general suspicion of “creativity” and its connotations of individual talent and genius (see for example Wolff, 1981; Becker, 2008). In such narratives, the question of the cultural worker as a subject has often been viewed with skepticism and as something that might reinforce individualistic and bourgeois myths. Banks (2007:8) wonders if

cultural work, with its connotations of “art” and “creativity”, its idiosyncratic practices, evasive structures and its generation of seemingly trivial, superfluous and luxury goods, may have appeared somewhat distant from the “essences” of economic life and so failed to ignite the enthusiasm of those more concerned with the “real” world of manual labour [...] a reluctance to study cultural workers may stem from some deeply held prejudices toward regarding cultural production as “real” work – with employment in music, art, fashion, television and so on, often being understood as a “fun” or pleasurable vocation rather than as structured economic activity.

As this quote exemplifies, cultural work has long been positioned as “unique” contra other forms of work, and as involving fun and pleasurable activities that incorporate much of the workers’ subjectivity and personality into the labor process rather than being a clear case of capitalist alienation and exploitation (Huws, 2010). While such

explanations capture some aspects that are indeed particular to cultural labor, they might also reinforce and fetishize romantic visions of this work as radically different from other forms of work (McRobbie, 2016a).

Around the mid 2000s, several studies on cultural and creative labor emerged, often with some proclamation of labor as a “blindspot” or the urgent need to “bring work back in” (Hesmondhalgh & Pratt, 2005:9; Beck, 2005; Banks, 2007; McKinlay & Smith, 2009; McGuigan, 2010; Huws, 2010; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Mathieu, 2012; Hesmondhalgh, 2013). This newfound interest seems to have corresponded with the wider societal celebration of creativity. From this research, we know that the cultural industries have long been characterized by precarious, underpaid, and labor-intensive work on contract, freelance, or per-project basis (Gill & Pratt, 2008; de Peuter, 2011; Ilsøe et al., 2021:59). Cultural workers often have to juggle multiple jobs and income streams to balance underpaid commissions, combining artistic and cultural gigs with day jobs, side jobs, and non-waged income streams (Lindström, 2016; Alacovska, 2022).

Unpaid and underpaid work is furthermore a structural feature of cultural labor markets (Siebert & Wilson, 2013; Shade & Jacobson, 2015) where “you’re only as good as your last job” (Blair, 2001) and therefore continuously have to produce and uphold business relations to secure further work opportunities. One set of explanations for why cultural workers are willing to work for free points to cultural work as self-expressive, creative, and fun (see Gill, 2014). As de Peuter notes (2011:271), the model of the artist who creates for psychological, non-monetary rewards has often been transposed to commercial cultural production. Hesmondhalgh (2013:255) refers to this as the “labor-of-love” explanation — in the pursuit of their “calling” for unalienated and self-fulfilling work, monetary compensation might be of secondary importance, which can motivate young cultural workers in particular to endure precarious conditions and unpaid labor. Mackenzie and McKinlay (2020:12) argue that, at that stage, many cultural workers are expected to work for free as a “symbol of passion”, showing that they are motivated enough to “deserve” a place within these industries.

The precarious nature of cultural work might seem to contradict romantic understandings of this work as fun and pleasurable but nonetheless align with traditional conceptions of “tortured” artists suffering for their art as a symbol of authenticity (Cinque et al., 2021; Alacovska & Kärreman, 2023). Workers with cultural or artistic professions often express that they are motivated by passion and love for their work, by promises of glamour and fame, by a “calling” to create, or by desiring work that is creative and personally satisfying, with the potential to lead to self-realization or a meaningful lifestyle (McRobbie, 2016a; Duffy, 2017).

From previous research, we can position commercial cultural production between two main logics of value — an economic logic and an artistic or anti-economic logic (Mills, 1963:378; Bourdieu, 1996:142). Ryan (1992:34) frames this as the art-capital contradiction, which describes the “conflicts and tensions which emerge when culture is transformed into capital” and cultural objects are commodified,

produced, and circulated for their exchange value. With the large-scale, industrial production of cultural commodities in particular, creative elements are often suppressed through the far-reaching division of labor and the separation of manual labor from mental labor. However, even in its industrial form, cultural labor tends to retain a comparatively large degree of creative autonomy for workers, at least at the idea stage. Banks (2010:252) argues that this is because autonomy “is a structural precondition for effective capitalist cultural production”.

According to Ryan, cultural and creative workers cannot be managed like other workers because they are more difficult to separate from what they produce. This holds especially true for cases when the “person-specific” elements (McKinlay & Smith, 2009:13) are part of the authenticity or aura (cf. Benjamin, 1969) of a particular work. This makes cultural workers less interchangeable and thus “less amenable than other forms to incorporation as abstract labour-power to be employed in the process of valorisation” (Ryan, 1992:34). Therefore, capital must “seek to embrace contingency, capriciousness and uncertainty” in the labor process, as “divesting cultural workers of their autonomy [...] would undermine the very basis of the value generated in cultural production” (Banks, 2010:260). This is arguably one reason for why wage labor as a form of employment has been weakly developed within the cultural industries.

Long before the platformization of work, these sectors have been characterized by a strong reliance on freelance labor, project workers, and independent contractors (Beckman & Månsson, 2008; McKinlay & Smith, 2009:55). Cultural workers tend to display high levels of self-motivation and identification with their work, which makes excessive managerial control and supervision less important. Contracting freelancers, with relative autonomy to shape how, where, and why they work, has been a strategy for facilitating creativity and innovation while simultaneously reducing costs and avoiding employer responsibilities (Cohen, 2012:142).

The ambiguous professional position of cultural workers is shaped by differing and sometimes competing logics and values, where monetary gain and stability may not be primary goals (Gerber, 2017; Nørholm Lundin, 2022b). Discourses of passion are prevalent in the way many cultural workers speak about their careers and form their subjectivities, as well as for how their work is valorized (Arvidsson et al., 2010; Alacovska, 2020). Cultural workers tend to invest much affect into their careers and are often required to engage in intense emotional labor to manage the insecurity and instability of their careers, as well as maintain business relations (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Nørholm Lundin, 2022a).

While freelancing and independent contracting have long been comparatively common in the cultural industries, they have, according to Cohen (2016:87), lately “become more of an explicit strategy for diminishing the employed labor force”. Lorey (2009:196) argues that the result of this is that atypical cultural or artistic careers have lost some of their oppositionality as counter-behavior against a rigid working life, as once-oppositional impulses have since been incorporated into the system. Others argue that the relative autonomy of cultural work still contains

oppositional leanings, which makes it possible to imagine genuinely good and meaningful work or even “radical social transformation” (Banks, 2010:262).

The literature on freelance work within the cultural industries is quite limited in a Swedish context. Most research seems to be focused on freelance journalism, a sector where it has become increasingly difficult to make a living (Edström & Ladendorf, 2012; Werne, 2015; Örnebring, 2018; Norbäck & Styhre, 2019; Norbäck, 2021a, 2021b, 2022). A recent survey conducted by the magazine *Journalisten* (Nesser, 2024) of the members of the Swedish Union of Journalists, shows that 80% earn less than the minimum wage set by collective agreements for employed journalists, 8% earn below the relative poverty threshold, and 60% have to combine freelance journalism with other income sources, although many still struggle to make a living.

Other studies include Nørholm Lundin’s (2022a, 2022b) studies on freelance musicians in Sweden, Lindström’s (2016) study of multiple-job holding among artistic workers, and Flisbäck’s (2011, 2017) studies and reports on artistic work and entrepreneurship. Overall, this literature paints a similar picture to the international literature. Although Swedish cultural workers may be somewhat protected by welfare provisions and state support of the arts, they are increasingly exposed to precarious employment conditions and relatively low pay. Many are so-called “combinators”, who must combine solo self-employment in the cultural industries with short-term employment in other sectors to make a living. Yet, Swedish freelancers seem to attach much meaning and derive much pleasure from their work, which makes their position ambiguous.

## The platformization of cultural work

In this final section, I discuss the effects of platformization on freelance work in the cultural industries. I begin by outlining some of the general discussions about work in platform capitalism and the gig economy before pointing to some of the implications of digital platforms for cultural work more specifically.

### **Platform work and the gig economy**

Research on the platformization of work is situated within several different disciplines and theoretical traditions. As a result, concepts like digital work and digital labor have quite different and distinct meanings in different contexts (see Gandini, 2021). Jarrett (2022a:24) recently observed that the lack of agreement on conceptual understandings in the literature on digital labor can be linked to “a peculiar schism between studies of ‘gig work’ and creative ‘social media work,’ with very little cross-fertilization of ideas between the two fields”. Jarrett notes that this division seems to partly follow the already gendered dimensions of work in the

public and private spheres. She argues that gig work in the public sphere (for say Uber or Deliveroo), which has been explored by sociologists of work and by others, follows traditionally male-coded and masculine imaginaries of manual work, whereas social media work more often is carried out in domestic settings and is defined by more typical “feminized” traits such as involving higher degrees of intimacy and affect.

The schism between studies on gig work and social media work has also often corresponded to disciplinary boundaries and interests. What has become known as “digital labor studies” has largely developed within media studies and cultural studies, where the concept of digital labor has quite distinct and specific meanings compared to how it is used within the sociology of work (see Gandini, 2021). This research has not been primarily engaged with “traditional” working life but with how value is produced on social media. Inspired by Terranova’s (2004:74) influential writings on free labor, this research started from her argument that activities like designing websites, contributing to email lists, or building virtual spaces and environments can be seen as a form of free labor “simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited”. Often conducted from a critical political economy perspective, later research has explored changed forms of exploitation and value extraction in digital capitalism (Scholz, 2013; Fuchs, 2014).

These so-called digital labor debates (see for instance Hesmondhalgh, 2010; Andrejevic, 2010; Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012; Fuchs, 2010, 2014; Ritzer, 2014) have been important for challenging common conceptions of work and for exploring the centrality of uncompensated user activities for the business models of platform companies, which often build on harvesting and extracting user data that can be analyzed or sold to advertisers. Representing one extreme in the debate, Fuchs (2010: 191) argues, from an orthodox Marxist framework, that using social media platforms without compensation “is an extreme form of exploitation, in which the producers [sic] work completely for free and are therefore infinitely exploited” by platform companies extracting value from the data and content they produce.

Hesmondhalgh (2010:278) argues that exploitation is not a good concept for understanding users’ contributions to digital platforms, as these activities often are voluntary and motivated by other factors than economic compensation, such as fun or the satisfaction gained from contributing to online communities. Others argue that platform companies do not so much exploit the “labor” of individual users as extract value from the digital commons created by aggregated userbases (Srnicek, 2017:56) or the affective relations sustained by users (Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012). Arvidsson and Colleoni (2012), in opposition to Fuchs, argue that what platforms like Facebook mainly extract value from is not the value produced by the individual Facebook user. Rather, what makes their business model valuable is how they attract financial investors based on network effects. In relation to the wider processes of financialization discussed earlier, many platform companies have proved unable to generate stable profits from the transactions carried out on their platform and are instead dependent on speculative finance capital (see also Arvidsson, 2020).



Whereas media studies have explored digital labor from a focus on *social media platforms* as sites of uncompensated work, the growing sociology of work literature on platform labor has mostly focused on actual paid labor in the gig economy, intermediated through digital *labor platforms*. Such platforms organize and connect buyers and sellers of on-demand labor in the form of short services and tasks. Where social media platforms extract value from user-generated content and data, a labor platform functions as an intermediary and point of production that “imposes a capital–labour relationship upon users, facilitating – and regulating – the direct exchange of labour as a commodity” (Gandini, 2021:374). On these platforms, workers typically own the means of production needed to carry out work — a car if they drive for Uber, a bicycle for Foodora, or a computer if they design websites through Fiverr — while the platforms control and extract a rent from any transactions (van Doorn & Badger, 2020).

There are labor platforms for services ranging from microwork (Amazon Mechanical Turk, Clickworker), transport (Uber, Lyft), food delivery (Foodora, Deliveroo), and household tasks (Taskrabbit, Taskrunner) to design and creative work (Upwork, Fiverr). Due to this heterogeneity, the literature contains an abundance of concepts and typologies. Palm (2019:4) separates gig work into three categories: qualified online work, unqualified online work, and physical offline work. She includes creative work, translation, programming, and design into the first category, while the second category involves more monotonous click- and microwork. Woodcock and Graham (2020) separate geographically tethered work from cloudwork carried out remotely over the internet. Wood and Lehdonvirta (2021:1369) distinguish local gig work from remote gig work, typically delivered online. While local gig work has received a lot of scholarly attention, remote cloudwork has been less researched, even though it is about as common or even more common than physically located gig work (Wood et al., 2019:57).

A central point of debate regarding labor platforms has been the employment status of those performing work. Although there have been some recent successful examples in the Nordic countries and Sweden of trade unions and individual platform companies negotiating collective agreements (Larsen & Ilsøe, 2021:54), labor platforms generally frame themselves as intermediators of work rather than as employers. They typically classify workers as entrepreneurs, freelancers, or independent contractors who carry out work directly for the buyer of a specific service. This means that gig workers are generally responsible for having the capital and equipment needed to carry out the work; are guaranteed no minimum income; are only paid for specific tasks or gigs; and have limited access to social safety systems, collective agreements, and collective organization (Palm, 2019; Stewart & Stanford, 2017; Fleming, 2017).

Some see labor platforms as being built on “false” or “bogus” self-employment. Gig workers, while formally self-employed, might lack both the security of employment and the independence of the truly self-employed to negotiate their own prices and terms (Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2021). However, with gig work in the

cultural industries, including digital freelancing, it makes little sense to claim that platforms like Upwork or Fiverr “misclassify” sellers as independent contractors (see Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2021:1370). At least in Sweden, many cultural workers who use these platforms have their own companies before joining a platform and combine clients from these platforms with other clients found through their networks or through their wider reputation. In the study of cultural gig work, I argue that questions other than the legal classification debates are more important.

An increasing number of studies have explored how digital labor platforms contribute to new forms of control through algorithmic management systems, digital surveillance, information asymmetries, and digital ratings systems (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Gandini, 2019). Labor platforms often mediate between the supply and demand of labor through algorithmic matching systems — what in the literature is known as *algorithmic management*. Workers for Uber or Foodora do not regularly meet the management of the company but are required to conduct all communication with the company through the app. Studies have shown how algorithmic systems offer new ways of controlling and managing workers. In this way, data from consumers and workers become an input for the algorithms, which can sort worker profiles, distribute tasks, and even deactivate workers without notice (Wood et al., 2019). These systems are characterized by information asymmetries, where workers do not know which information the platform companies use to calculate ratings, prices, or match them together with buyers (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Labor platforms also often use rating systems for the evaluation of the profiles of workers, which facilitates a low-cost outsourcing of control and supervision from traditional management to consumers (Stanford, 2017:394) — and to the workers themselves, who might have to engage in self-monitoring and self-control to succeed.

An increasing number of studies measure platform work, although due to conceptual variations and other factors, the results of these studies often vary. Furthermore, platform companies are seldom transparent with their data, and existing labor market statistics are often not adequate for measuring platform work and distinguishing it from other forms of atypical work. A few years ago, it was estimated that more than 70 million people over the world have found work through digital labor platforms (Heeks, 2017). Kässi and Lehdonvirta (2018) suggest that the global gig economy grows annually by about 20%, and others have predicted that digital platforms will have already mediated one third of all labor transactions by 2025 (Woodcock & Graham, 2020). This picture is however complicated by the fact that, as of yet, few workers seem to generate a majority of their income through labor platforms. Instead, many use them as a complement to other jobs (Fleming et al., 2019; Ilsøe et al., 2021). This impression is strengthened by recent estimations by Kässi et al. (2022) that there are 163 million freelance profiles registered on labor platforms globally — a substantial increase since 2015, which, however, does not correspond to the equal increase in how many who actually find and carry out work through these platforms.

From the existing studies on the scope of the Swedish gig economy, we also know that few people attain a majority of their income through labor platforms alone. Huws and Joyce (2016) find that 12% of Swedish workers are active in some capacity within the gig economy. While many only occasionally work through labor platforms, 27% of those engaged in the gig economy reported that they received either their full income or more than half of their income from them. Another report (SOU, 2017:24) found that 4.5% have used digital platforms to find work. Most used the platforms as a secondary source of work in addition to their primary employment, and only a minority used the platforms as a main source of income (SOU, 2017:24 p. 204p). Larsen and Ilsøe (2021:54) point to studies showing that only 2.5% of the Swedish population has sold their labor through platforms. It is most common for younger workers and those born outside of Sweden to seek work through labor platforms, as well as for workers in big cities (Palm, 2019:19).

Although studies of the Swedish gig economy vary in their estimations, it is likely they underestimate its size and that more workers are engaged in it today than when these surveys were carried out (Palm, 2019:18; Larsen & Ilsøe, 2021:54). Nevertheless, while digitalization and platformization contribute to the expansion of atypical non-standard work, labor platforms specifically seem to play a minor role in these transformations thus far. In this sense, case studies of particular labor platforms have arguably received an unproportionate degree of attention in the literature on platform work. I argue that digital freelancing in many important respects must be seen as traversing the boundaries between the fields described above. I agree with Fleming et al. (2019:488), who note that the “size of the gig economy is probably exaggerated because it is conflated with casual work per se (which has indeed grown) and non-labour platforms”. Ticona (2022:6) similarly argues that “the online platforms that account for a much smaller proportion of workers have taken center stage in our public conversations about digital technologies and work, while the technologies that scaffold the experiences of a much larger proportion of workers have received much less attention”. This makes an interdisciplinary focus important, which may account for how digital freelancers use different types of platforms to make a living.

## **The platformization of cultural work**

Several characteristics of cultural labor have been amplified by platformization. Cultural labor markets have long been characterized by high structural competitiveness due to the oversupply of aspiring workers vis-a-vis the demand for labor (Menger, 1999). Hesmondhalgh (2010:277) notes that “in the history of cultural production, only a very few people within any society have taken on the role of cultural producers in return for financial reward”. This creates a very competitive environment, with few huge successes and many aspiring but struggling workers. Platformization, along with entrepreneurial ideologies promoting self-employment and self-realization through work, have further increased the

competitiveness of cultural production through an influx of young and aspirational workers. This enlarges the “reserve army” of cultural workers (Cohen, 2016) and leads to a “staggering increase in the talent pool” (Poell et al., 2022:112), which fuels competition and exerts a downward pressure on wages, fees, and terms.

For organizations, the deterritorialization of cultural work through digital information technologies has made it even easier to outsource and subcontract production to freelancers or amateur producers (Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter, 2009). Platforms make free or cheap labor more easily accessible (Marà & Pulignano, 2022) by increasing the pool of often young workers willing to work for no or little pay with lofty promises of future income opportunities and successful careers (cf. Duffy, 2017). Digital labor platforms and social media platforms have made organizations much less dependent on the local or even national supply of cultural labor. The Covid-19 pandemic has further accelerated this trend, with remote work becoming normalized (Razmerita et al., 2022).

As mentioned, the sociological literature on platform and gig work has largely been concerned with labor platforms. Yet, as recently argued by Alacovska et al. (2024:162), surprisingly little research has been conducted on cultural gig work, despite this work being a model for the gig economy as such.

Labor platforms for cultural work (that mediate gigs within everything from design to coding, online branding, illustration, and translating) include Upwork, Fiverr, and Gigstr. On these platforms, workers typically have to compete globally with others through their profiles, portfolios, and ratings/comments by previous clients. This generates new forms of platform-specific precarity (Duffy et al., 2021). Workers are dependent on the positive ratings of buyers for being able to secure continuous income, which creates lock-in effects and an asymmetrical relation between buyer and seller, where the main power resides within the former position (Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2022). Many platforms filter away or deactivate workers with low ratings through their algorithms, making it hard or impossible for them to continue to find work through them (Wood et al., 2019:64; Gandini, 2019). Therefore, the question of algorithmic visibility (Bucher, 2018) is crucial for workers who are dependent on digital platforms for generating their reputation and developing a self-brand.

The platformization of cultural work however extends beyond labor platforms. Compared to, for instance, gig workers within food delivery or transport, digital freelancers have the possibility to establish reputations for themselves independent from intermediating labor platforms (Gandini, 2016). This makes it crucial, as recently has been argued by scholars particularly within media studies, to pay attention to the *multi-platform practices* of cultural producers and other workers (Scolere, 2019; Hair et al., 2022; Poell et al., 2022; Glatt, 2022). It is thus important to acknowledge the interconnectedness of different platforms in wider ecosystems (van Dijck et al., 2018), where users are not solely controlled by the logics of particular platforms but can in turn also strategically utilize different platforms and their affordances for their own purposes (Madianou and Miller, 2013).

I argue that a focus on these practices is missing in the sociological literature on platform work. Although labor platforms strive to make workers dependent and subordinated to their infrastructure (Schor et al., 2020; Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2022), freelancers who have a variety of clients and who can establish a wider online reputation (Gandini, 2016) can make themselves more independent from the enclosing mechanisms of particular platforms. The understanding of how workers combine different sorts of platforms, and how this both can counteract precarity and also give rise to new forms of it, is still in its infancy. This thesis contributes with knowledge on how cultural producers use several different platforms and combine them in a personal media ecology. By marketing themselves online and by building self-brands for themselves, they can establish business relations independent from intermediating platforms. Recent research has shown that self-branding is increasingly a multi-platformed practice, where creators have to adapt their performances of self, creativity, and professionalism to different audience expectations, platform cultures, and algorithms (Scolere, 2019; Hair et al., 2022).

Furthermore, platformization has reshaped what we mean by cultural production. This development can be tied in particular to the emergence of the web 2.0, a concept coined by tech entrepreneur Tim O'Reilly after the dotcom crash in 2005 to describe the new "participatory" web, where users not only consume but also produce content (see Rouzé, 2019). Turning users into creators — a shift that since has been further accentuated by today's digital platforms — has meant that discourses about creativity have extended beyond professional cultural workers to ordinary users, as thresholds to distribute and promote content have been significantly lowered. Concepts like *prosumption* (Ritzer, 2014), *produsage* (Fuchs, 2010), and *playbour* (Scholz, 2013) have been used to describe these tendencies, by which boundaries between play and work, and production and consumption, are blurred. This creates new forms of tension between professional cultural producers and amateurs, reflecting a shift from cultural work to cultural entrepreneurship (Hair et al., 2022).

These shifts are exemplified by what Kenney and Zysman call platform-mediated content creation (2019:27). Platforms can offer creators new possibilities to monetize digital content through, for instance, partnerships with platform companies by being sponsored for influencer marketing collaborations (Duffy, 2017; Glatt, 2022), making money as a video game streamer through Twitch (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019), or by receiving donations through crowdfunding platforms like Patreon, Indiegogo, or Kickstarter (Archer, 2019; Rouzé, 2019). It is difficult to determine just how many are able to make an income on this sort of production, but Kenney and Zysman (2019:27) emphasize that "the market for these products is extremely skewed, with a few huge successes and an extremely long tail of content that has little engagement". Cultural workers can today mix these types of income with more regular forms of commissions.

Despite digital creative careers often being insecure, underpaid, and precarious, strong meritocratic discourses and ideologies promote platform-based creative

careers as something everyone can achieve today. Researchers have used concepts like *hope labor* (Kuehn & Corrigan 2013) and *aspirational labor* (Duffy, 2017) to make sense of why people engage in things like uncompensated content creation with the hopes of establishing a career in the future where they will get “paid to do what they love”. From her work on female fashion bloggers, Duffy (2017:11) concludes that aspirational labor and its surrounding ideology “romanticizes work as its conditions are becoming more precarious, time-intensive, and decidedly unromantic”. These future-oriented, aspirational modes of relating to one’s work and to the self thus play an ideological function in enlarging the reserve army of digital creators, intensifying competition, and arguably devaluing the professional expertise of cultural workers.

While there is evidence of how gig platforms contribute to the spread of highly exploitative and precarious forms of labor, counter-tendencies can also be found that point to the resistance of workers against these systems. For instance, digital platforms and their algorithms give rise to practices such as algorithmic gossip (Bishop, 2019), where communities of workers can help each other make sense of obtuse algorithms. Forums and social media can furthermore be used by workers that use labor platforms like Upwork to organize or express critique against how the platforms work; however, Gerber (2021:193) argues that these attempts at community building are seldom the priority of the literature, which tends to focus on the individualizing and anonymizing tendencies of these platforms rather than their relational aspects (see also Alacovska et al., 2024).



# Chapter 3. The production of digital freelancers: Theoretical perspectives

This chapter discusses the theoretical points of departure for the thesis. I argue that part of what characterizes digital freelance work is the incorporation of much subjectivity, affect, and everyday life into the productive process. “The production of digital freelancers” in the chapter title thus has a double meaning: It implies both a focus on the *labor* these workers do, which extends beyond paid commissions, and the production *of* digital freelancers as a particular group of laboring subjects.

To make sense of this duality, I primarily draw on Foucauldian Governmentality theory and Marxist theories on labor. While I consider these traditions to be best suited for answering my research questions, they each have their shortcomings. Governmentality provides tools for understanding the formation of subjectivities in relation to dispersed forms of power beyond the employment relationship. However, I argue that the large focus in this research on technologies and rationalities of government as reproduced in institutional settings and textual material much too often has neglected how people negotiate, experience, resist, and shape themselves in relation to these governing attempts. This has resulted in somewhat totalizing accounts of power. Furthermore, as Fleming (2014b:883) notes, governmentality often fails to locate its concerns “within the context of capitalism proper – that is to say, class relations, exploitation and divergent political interests”.

Marxist theories are more directly attuned for conceptualizing the latter questions but has generally focused on wage labor rather than solo self-employment and independent work with no clear workplace. In addition, in much Marxist theorizing, subjectivity “remains an afterthought” (Read, 2003:7) at best, or is reduced to a superstructural effect of a material base supposed to determine consciousness.

One exception to the later observations is the largely Italian tradition of autonomist Marxism, or post-Operaism. This tradition is perhaps better described as Marxian rather than Marxist: Theorists like Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, Maurizio Lazzarato, Paulo Virno, Franco Berardi, and Sandro Mezzadra have attempted to read Marx “beyond Marxism” (Mezzadra, 2018:1) as an orthodox-ideological framework and put him “in conversation with theoretical developments, which Marxism failed to contain in itself [and] to interrogate Marx’s texts through the lens of existing problematics and struggles” (Mezzadra, 2018:3). These theorists have fused an unorthodox reading of Karl Marx with influences from thinkers like Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari. By rejecting teleological



readings of history, orthodox interpretations of Marxist theories of value, and reified distinctions between base and superstructure, they have developed a post-structural yet materially grounded understanding of the interconnectedness of labor and subjectivity today. I draw on these theorists to bridge the otherwise quite distinct and separate concerns of Marxist theory and governmentality.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter stands on four legs that relate to distinct but interconnected dimensions of the conceptual framework: *labor*, *subjectivity*, *platforms*, and *self-precarization*. In the next section, I begin by exploring what characterizes the labor of digital freelancers.

## Labor: Theorizing digital freelance work

A central aim of the dissertation is to answer how digital freelancers are formed as a category of laboring subjects. By adopting a Marxian perspective (e.g., Read, 2003; Hardt & Negri, 2009; Mezzadra, 2018), I examine how the formation of their subjectivities (which I turn to later in the chapter) relates to their formation as labor power. I therefore start by discussing what characterizes digital freelancers in the cultural industries as a category of labor. To do so, I draw on concepts of the social factory, immaterial labor, and affective labor, which challenge traditional models of labor and exploitation.

### Rethinking work, labor, and exploitation

What characterizes digital freelancers as a category of labor? If we take traditional Marxist theory as a starting point, work, as a general anthropological category, can be separated from value-producing labor as historically specific for capitalism (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013). Work has existed in all societies. Through work, humans create things with use values — tools, food, shelter, clothes, and other

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<sup>5</sup> *Autonomist Marxism* emerged from the Italian workerist movement (*operaismo*) in the 1960s. It is characterized by a particular ontological reading of Marx — Read (2003:13) calls it the autonomist hypothesis — which views worker struggle as the motor of social change. It sees capitalism as basically a reactive system that transforms and adapts in relation to the local resistance, collaboration, and tactics of workers (Wright, 2002; Tronti, 2019). Where some Marxist traditions romanticize labor, *operaismo* is decidedly anti-productivist and views the refusal of work as a central form of resistance against the colonizing tendencies of work (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Weeks, 2011). *Post-operaismo* is one branch that emerged in the 1990s as a response to new social movements and the new ‘post-Fordist’ form of capitalism characterized by flexibility, information, globalization, knowledge, and communication. Drawing more directly on post-structural influences, it highlights the importance of subjectivity, language, and affect for contemporary capitalism (Mezzadra, 2009). Post-operaismo was popularized for a larger audience, within and outside of academia, with the release of *Empire* and *Multitude* by Hardt and Negri (2000, 2005).

things they need to survive (Marx, 2011:27). Work in capitalism, on the other hand, is characterized by *labor power* becoming a commodity with an exchange value.

In the traditional Marxist class schema, capitalism is characterized by the separation between a working class without any means of production of their own that are thus required to sell their labor power to survive, and a capitalist class that own the means of production.<sup>6</sup> Although this dualistic separation of two main classes has been problematized, it serves to highlight an antagonistic relation where the latter buys the labor power of the former not only to produce commodities with exchange value but also to extract surplus value. By not fully compensating workers for the value of what they produce, employers can extract surplus value. This is what Marxists typically mean with *exploitation*, which here refers to not so much a moral condition but rather an “objective” relation (see Harvey, 2018:22).

Labor power refers to “the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being” (Marx, 2011:119) that are used to produce. It is not labor as such or the worker herself that is the commodity in capitalism (as in, for instance, slavery) but rather the capacity to produce. Therefore, labor power cannot be separated from the bodies of workers: It is as Virno (2003:82) puts it a “pure *potential*, quite distinct from its corresponding acts”. This potential is realized first in the labor process, which is characterized by indeterminacy. While the wage for a labor transaction might be pre-determined through labor contracts or collective agreements, the effort put into the labor process — and thus, the value that can be extracted — is not, as it is shaped by the social conditions of work, the technical setting, the subjective state of the workers, and so on (see Braverman, 1974:57).

Within Marxist-influenced traditions like Labor Process Theory, the focus has often been on how management reduces indeterminacy through labor discipline and control in order to harness as much value as possible from bought labor power (e.g., Braverman, 1974; Thompson, 1989; Smith, 2006). This tradition has long considered the paradigmatic form for the exchange between capital and labor to be wage labor, where workers sell their labor power for a specific time in exchange for a salary. However, I maintain that this focus on wage labor in much research and theory has meant that standard employment to an unproportionate extent has been seen as the main — even only — site for the extraction of surplus value. This has had a number of obscuring consequences in relation to non-waged forms of work.

First, it becomes very difficult to conceptualize the labor of non-salaried workers according to such a schema. Digital freelancers are not (mainly) employed but instead typically get paid per piece or project, which does not necessarily correspond well to the amount of time they work. They often have a relative autonomy to decide when and how to work and often own some of the means of production necessary for their work (computers, cell phones, cameras, and similar, but also their brains, intellects, creativity, and social skills). Furthermore, they are embedded in an

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<sup>6</sup> *Means of production* refers to the material and immaterial tools, materials, machineries, capabilities, and so on needed to produce a commodity.

ideological context which address them as entrepreneurial subjects. In several ways, they seem to fall outside the category of wage labor as it is typically understood.

Nonetheless, as Cohen (2016:26) argues, freelancers typically “do not control the broader conditions in which they work, individually or collectively. Freelancers do not have the power and economic status that accrues to entrepreneurs”. In Sweden there is large variation within the group of cultural freelancers, ranging from highly precarious members of the working class, to a comparatively large middle class with more cultural than economic capital, to a very small segment of successful celebrity-entrepreneurs with strong economic resources. While all my participants have to be *entrepreneurial*, few of them can meaningfully be called entrepreneurs. Characterizing them as such obscures how they are highly integrated in uneven and often exploitative relations with clients. Yet, as Cohen (2016) mentions, difficulties in locating freelancers within traditional stiff Marxist class schemas means that these workers sometimes have been seen as less important to study by critical researchers. This neglect is ironic, considering that Marx himself described piece wages — with strong similarities to the model for payment in the gig economy — as “the most fruitful source of reductions of wages” (2011:391) and thus “the form of wages most in harmony with the capitalist mode of production” (2011:393).

Clinging on to a reified understanding of waged employment as a privileged site makes it difficult to understand piece wages and atypical incomes as new paradigmatic models of digital platform work. Digital freelancers often combine several jobs and non-waged incomes sustained over different platforms and in different contractual arrangements to support themselves (cf. Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). They are a heterogenous hybrid category of workers from which value can be extracted whether their labor is waged, paid on a per-piece basis, or uncompensated; they can produce value on an employer’s premises between 9–5, but also at home in the evening, during the family holiday, or through “free labor” online (Fleming, 2014a). Such arrangements allow clients to reduce indeterminacy by shifting risks, costs, and responsibilities to the workers themselves. This is, as discussed in chapter 2, common in the cultural industries, where the high supply of labor makes it easy to cut costs by hiring freelancers rather than employing workers.

Traditional Marxist models of labor and exploitation are furthermore inadequate for capturing shifts which have moved value extraction outside of salaried working time and the workplace toward various forms of unpaid labor and reproductive activities often not understood as “work” but which are central for establishing what Fraser (2014:6) calls the “background conditions of possibility” for capitalist production and valorization. For digital freelancers, this includes not only much non-salaried and unpaid labor but also various kinds of reproductive labor. Acknowledging the value of social reproduction is important for understanding precarious work as not only reproduced in workplaces but also through unpaid work in the reproductive sphere (Weeks, 2011), which is necessary for accessing paid work as a freelancer. This requires us to shift our gaze from the employer’s premises to life outside of it — to what autonomists have called the *social factory*.

## Immaterial labor and the social factory

The fragmentation of labor and blurred boundaries between work and life outside of it are some of the things that, from my empirical material, define digital freelancing. Rather than only being a question of a disrupted work–life balance, I argue that this reflects how value in contemporary capitalism increasingly is drawn from outside waged labor and salaried work.

With a notion from the autonomist lexicon, I understand the incorporation of more of the workers' social life into the productive process as an expansion of the *social factory* — a metaphorical “factory without walls” that extends throughout society by breaking down boundaries between labor and employment, work and life, and production and reproduction. Originally coined by Tronti (2019/1966), theorists like Hardt and Negri (2005:148) have since used the concept to analyze how social life has become productive and how the “site of production” (in Marxist theory traditionally symbolized by a factory or an office) has stretched itself into everyday life. They argue that capital increasingly subsumes and valorizes social *commons* that are produced outside the traditional workplace and that previously were considered unproductive, such as social relations, subjectivities, affects, community-based knowledge, and lifestyles. This is visible in self-organized work such as that of digital freelancers, who structure their work independently, work from home, draw on knowledge-commons developed in their self-organized collaborative networks, learn new skills and competences in their free time, draw on their subjectivities when marketing themselves, and so on.

With a further notion by Lazzarato (1996), I understand digital freelance labor in the cultural industries as a form of *immaterial labor*, which he has argued is at the heart of post-Fordist modes of production. Lazzarato (1966:133) defines this concept as the “labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity”, which increasingly relies on communicative, affective, symbolic, and technological skills. According to Lazzarato, immaterial labor consists of activities that we often do not recognize as work, such as producing cultural tastes and norms, consumer desire, brand relations, subjectivities, trends, and public opinion.

Cultural workers in particular both produce and satisfy consumer demand: As Lazzarato (1996:138) writes, their work “transforms, and creates the ‘ideological’ and cultural environment of the consumer. [...] Immaterial labor produces first and foremost a ‘social relationship’”. Not only must they create a need for their services that may not already exist. The products they sell— a branding profile, a company logotype, Instagram content, an advertising video, a website — furthermore often serve to facilitate more consumption and to set up valuable social relations between producers, consumers, and brands. Cultural production online is often tightly connected to branding and advertising industries, which compete over the scarce attention of consumers as well as extract value from it (Celis Bueno, 2017). In a sense, cultural platform workers also produce consumer-subjects, with particular tastes, desires, identities, and so on, which reproduces social life in particular ways.

A contemporary example of this is influencer marketing, which also well illustrates the concept of the social factory. Influencers create social relations between themselves and their community of followers and build branded environments for the consumption of commodities and lifestyles by drawing on their everyday lives, interests, affects, relations, and subjectivities (see Duffy, 2017). Making followers engage with corporate brands through likes, comments, and other affective expressions produces “a social relation, a shared meaning, an emotional involvement that was not there before” (Arvidsson, 2005:237), which creates brand value and brand recognition. It may also produce subjects who identify with this content. While such social and affective activities can be highly meaningful both for influencers and their followers, they also produce an “outside” to traditional workplaces, where value can be extracted and captured by both advertisers and platform owners from the attention, affects, and sociality of users. Yet, such activities are not understood as “work” in the everyday sense of the word.

This concept of immaterial labor has rightly been criticized for being too general and overstretched in some research, where it has been presented as a new paradigm of post-Fordist labor as such (see Camfield, 2007; Gill & Pratt, 2008). Without making any such grandiose claims, I argue that digital freelancing in the cultural industries is a case where the concept is not only illuminating but also necessary. While this sort of work does not dominate the labor market in any quantitative sense, it represents a qualitative tendency for production in the global North “to become communicative, informational, image-oriented” (Hardt, 2005:176) and digitally mediated. Although this work obviously still is embodied and involves both manual and physical operations, it relies much on communicative, creative, technological, cognitive, and affective skills, that draw on subjectivities and everyday life.

Reinterpreting a notion from Foucault (which I will return to in later sections), Hardt and Negri (2009:134) argue that immaterial labor is *biopolitical*, in the sense that it is increasingly concerned with the blurring of labor and production with “life itself” and reproduction. Labor increasingly produces not “only material goods but also relationships and ultimately social life itself” (Hardt & Negri, 2005:109), often forming social life and subjectivity in the image of work and orienting it toward consumption. Although this produces a tendency for work to colonize other spheres of life, Hardt and Negri (2005:66) stand out among these theorists by being quite optimistic of the biopolitical mode of labor, arguing that there is also a utopian element to it and that it holds “enormous potential for positive social transformation”. Everyday life is not a resource which can ever be fully controlled, commodified, and exploited, as it always exists in excess to the attempts of enclosing it and extracting value from it. The centrality of everyday life in the productive process thus also opens up possibilities of creating new forms of life, collaborations, relationships, and subjectivities that can potentially resist capital and build more meaningful ways of organizing work and life autonomously.

## Affective labor and freelance temporalities

Given that immaterial laborers produce not only cultural commodities but also social relations, brand identities, and desire, *affective* and *emotional labor* (cf. Negri, 1999; Hochschild, 2003) are central parts of their work. I take these concepts as referring to both the manipulation of the worker's own emotions (being caring, personal, interesting, sociable, cool, etc.) as well as the production of affective states (pleasure, trust, well-being, desire, satisfaction, identification, excitement, and so on) in customers and others. Digital freelance work requires many different forms of affective and emotional labor, ranging from often feminized forms of care work in freelance communities, posting branded presentations of the self, instrumental schmoozing, and "compulsory socializing" (Cockayne, 2016) at network meetings, to appearing service-minded and professional in business relationships with clients.

From the perspective of the worker, Hochschild (2003:35) argues that emotional labor involves both what she calls "surface acting" (appearing to love one's job or being interested in what one's online followers write) and "deep acting" (managing one's emotions and self by inducing or suppressing certain feelings so that one really feels a required emotion). Yet, I would argue that these dimensions are seldom so easily clear-cut that we can distinguish "real" from "false" emotions. I rather understand affective labor as performative and productive in that it constantly produces, channels, controls, and regulates affects and emotions in ways where instrumental and genuine performances are difficult to separate.

Cultural workers in general — and women in particular — are, according to several writers, governed by affective ideals and norms of being passionate and feeling pleasure and love for their work (McRobbie, 2016a:103pp; Duffy, 2017). However, the affective features of cultural and digital labor do not only involve affirmative and positive emotions but also various negative emotions and affects. Self-doubt, depressive thoughts, mental distress, anxiety, shame, burnout, and self-blame are some of the negative emotions and affects which are visible in my material, and they often seem to be individualized responses to precarious working conditions. Gill and Pratt (2008:15p) argue that such affects can be seen as "endemic features of fields in which you are judged on what you produce [...] and your whole life and sense of self is bound up with your work". Fleming's (2014a:3) characterization of such negative emotions as the "negative externalities" of biopolitical work is however arguably misleading, as such emotions are also productive parts of immaterial labor, in that they orient behaviors.

This is evident in Virno's (1996) description of opportunism, fear, and cynicism as some of the dominant post-Fordist emotions. What he highlights is the ambivalence of these emotions, where cynical or disaffected responses to precarity are combined with opportunistic attempts at taking chances, strategizing, and getting ahead. As Virno (1996:17) notes, "Insecurity about one's place during periodic innovation, fear of losing recently gained privileges, and anxiety over being 'left behind' translate into flexibility, adaptability, and a readiness to reconfigure

oneself". What further complicates the case of cultural workers is that such "dark" emotions have been shown to be points of identification, as the "tormented artist" continues to be a romanticized trope against which cultural workers form their subjectivities and professional identities (Alacovska & Kärreman, 2023). In this sense, such emotions are productive, though also potentially harmful.

The centrality of affective labor arguably reflects a wider "feminization" of labor (Rubery, 2015). On one hand, this reflects how "the part-time, fractured, and unstable conditions traditionally associated with women's careers" (Jarrett, 2022a:156) have become a new normality for other workers too. It also reflects how work receives characteristics that within the current gendered order are coded as "feminine", with roots in domestic and reproductive work, such as being caring and sociable. From Hochschild's (2003) study of flight attendants, to Dowling's (2007) study of waitressing service workers, to Duffy's (2017) study of fashion bloggers, previous research has shown how the increased centrality of affective and emotional labor in post-Fordism is tied to strongly gendered logics. As Morini (2007:40) puts it, "cognitive capitalism tends to prioritize extracting value from relational and emotional elements, which are more likely to be part of women's experiential baggage". With the digitalization of cultural labor, this is especially visible within sectors of social media work, where many workers engage in particularly feminized forms of entrepreneurship and self-promotion.

The skills of independent workers are often developed outside the workplace, during so-called free time, between gigs, when networking, or in their social relations. While some necessary skills can be learned by doing commissioned work or through courses, others have to be learned independently, outside salaried time, by socializing with other freelancers or taking part in community knowledge. Freelancers are also increasingly socialized during precarious stages of unemployment. Virno (2003:85) calls unemployment a "training in precariousness and variability" where "those generically social talents are developed, as is getting in the habit of not developing lasting habits, all of which, once work is found, will act as true and real 'tools of the trade'". For freelancers, the unpaid "gaps" between paid commissions are thus not periods exempt from work. Rather, I argue they are periods of socialization, or "grey zones" of unpaid work (Pulignano & Morgan, 2022), when one not only develops the skills, habits, and affective responses that employers later might seek to valorize but also prepares the means for getting ahead and creating opportunities for oneself in the marketplace.

There are both temporal and spatial dimensions to the expansion of the social factory. In temporal terms, "putting life to work" means that working time and non-working time tends to blur. Mezzadra and Neilson (2013:89) note that in this context, "Whether it involves the encroachment of work into the domestic sphere or the more general putting to work of the individual's capacity for communication and sociality, the propensity of work to colonize more of life" becomes a key point of contestation. As I explore in chapter 8, the desire to control one's own time might for instance paradoxically lead to chronic overwork and problems to disconnect.

Spatially, as Hardt and Negri (2009:152) note, “The affective and intellectual talents, the capacities to generate cooperation and organizational networks, the communication skills, and the other competences that characterize biopolitical labor [...] are generally not site specific”. For freelancers, spatial boundaries between workplace and domains more typically associated with everyday life (the home, the café, the train, the city, the summer house, et cetera.) have long been blurred. Bologna (2018:106) identifies this “domestication of the workplace” as a defining feature of self-employment. This causes a “spatial extensification of work” (Pulignano & Morgan, 2022:10) where work risks to colonize everyday life. As costs of workspaces, equipment, internet and so on are outsourced to freelancers, this puts financial pressures on them and eventual families to organize workspaces: If this is not possible in the home, it might require freelancers to rent an office, a desk at a co-working space, or, if nothing else, buy expensive coffee at a local café to access their tables and Wi-Fi (cf. Merkel, 2018).

Digital technologies and platformization have further enabled work from anywhere at any time. Platforms make it easier to work with clients from all over the world, video conferencing tools enable meetings independent of place, and immaterial products can in seconds be emailed to another continent. Global space, in some ways, becomes less important, as freelancers can work for clients all over the world. This opens up new avenues for collaborations outside the nation state but intensifies global segmentation and fragmentation (cf. Mezzadra & Neilson, 2019).

Although concepts like the social factory and immaterial labor might seem totalizing — expressing ideas that there is no clear outside to the capital relationship — they also, to repeat, carry a potential for social change and imagining more meaningful ways of life and work (cf. Hardt & Negri, 2005:66). In particular, recent research on cultural work (e.g., van Dyk, 2018; Alacovska, 2022) has started to explore this through the lens of *commoning*. The post-wage regime of work gives rise to practices — the sharing of resources, building communities of care and support, helping each other outside the dictates of market relations — which, while they can be enclosed and exploited by capital, also can create alternative ways of living and new meaningful forms of social cooperation. To which extent the colonizing or utopian capacities of immaterial labor takes precedence in particular cases is an empirical question, but the theoretical possibility of digital freelancing being both of these things is important to acknowledge when going forward.

## Subjectivity: The formation of freelance subjectivities

Having conceptualized digital freelance labor, I now turn to issues of subjectivity and power. In the last section, I argued that the immaterialization of labor makes subjectivity a key dimension and site of struggle in contemporary labor markets. This section starts from a Foucauldian understanding of the production of



subjectivity, which sees it as entangled with relations of power. With *subjectivities*, I mean how people define and understand themselves and the world around them. I argue that the production of subjectivity always occurs in social and cultural settings, through discursive processes and through material relations of power.

The formation of subjectivities is a heterogeneous process. It is therefore important to emphasize that I am studying the production of plural, entangled subjectivities, rather than a singular subjectivity. Even as an idealized subject, *the* digital freelancer is a heterogeneous figure, involving all sorts of subjective ambivalences and contradictions. In the following, I discuss the production of subjectivity in relation to concepts of governmentality and biopolitics. My intention is to make these perspectives more ethnographically attuned to the experiences of freelance workers themselves. Foucault developed these concepts in his late writings and lectures (e.g., 2002, 2007a, 2008). There, his focus was often the state, and he never directly focused on contemporary working life. While I engage with Foucault's own writings, I also relate them to contemporary elaborations in order to make his ideas more directly applicable to the empirical realities of modern-day working life.

### **Power, governmentality, and discourse**

Foucauldian concepts like governmentality, technologies, and apparatuses offer starting points for understanding how the production of subjectivity is entangled with power. Contrary to perspectives where power is seen as a repressive or juridical force that says “no!”, Foucault (e.g., 2007b:156) understood power as a productive force that allows and steers people to act and see themselves and the world in certain ways rather than others. Power — seen as a relation and something which flows between actors, rather than a “thing” one “has” — enables and creates lifestyles, desires, practices, discourses, knowledge, and subjectivities.

For Foucault, *governmentality* describes how the exercise of power in modern society is connected to specific modes of steering individuals in their actions. He defines governmentality as a regime of power operating through the *conduct of conduct*, or acting upon the actions of others (Foucault, 2008:186). The question here is not only how our conduct is being governed “from above” by states, employers, organizations, media, platforms, and other authorities, but rather, and more importantly for my argument, how we are made to govern, discipline, and conduct ourselves as subjects “at a distance” (Miller & Rose, 2008) from centralized power. As Gago argues (2017:2), power is not “abstract nor macropolitical but rather arises from the encounter with forces at work and is embodied in various ways by the subjectivities and tactics of everyday life”.

Governmentality is, according to Foucault, enacted through different *technologies*, which in turn are part of larger ensembles or *apparatuses* (in French, *dispositifs*). Technologies refer to the “devices, tools, techniques, personnel, materials [...] that enabled authorities to imagine and act upon the conduct of persons individually and collectively” (Miller & Rose, 2008:16): In short, it is the

means through which people are governed, whether it is particular management techniques, welfare programmes, or confessional rituals. Technologies of power can be linguistic and discursive, but are also always historically situated and anchored within material practices, institutions, and instruments.

*Discourse* is here another central concept that often is taken for granted, but that is contested and has many varied meanings (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Foucault (1980) saw discourses as formations of statements and claims of truth regarding a specific topic, that set up rules for what can be said and thought about it, and which naturalize certain perceptions of the world while excluding others. Discourses, for Foucault, constitute the objects and subjects they speak of. However, rather than assuming that discourses have certain constitutive effects, I maintain that this is an empirical question. While there may be large macro-discourses which operate at a societal and cultural level, the way that people draw on discourses as resources when they talk about themselves and attach meaning to their practices may have many unpredictable outcomes and effects (see Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011).

The *apparatus* is, on the other hand, a vaguely defined concept in Foucault's own writings, but it has been taken up by interpreters like Deleuze (1992b) and Agamben (2009) as well as in recent working life studies where it has been described as a "highly promising concept" (Villadsen, 2021:473; see also Raffnsøe et al., 2016; Fleming, 2022). In an interview, Foucault defined the apparatus as

a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid [...] The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements (Foucault, 1980:195).

From this broad and admittedly vague definition, the apparatus is an "ensemble" or a "system" of relations between both discursive and material elements, procedures, and technologies, which together exercise power with certain needs or objectives in mind. Jackson and Carter (1998:60) propose that the apparatus can be seen as the ensemble which "operationalizes governmentality", a point which I find useful. However, I somewhat disagree with their statement that "it is the apparatus which produces submission and compliance to the demands of government", as this is to neglect questions of resistance. In line with Villadsen (2021), I argue that apparatuses do not only create submission but also give rise to counter-conduct which continuously transforms the apparatus itself. Apparatuses are therefore relational ensembles which shift over time, without ever being inherently coherent.

Foucault's mention above of "architectural forms" perhaps primarily points toward locations such as hospitals, factories, or prisons (the panopticon being the most famous Foucauldian example). But as I argue later, I think this also opens up for understanding infrastructures such as digital platforms as apparatuses. In this vein, Agamben (2009) has for instance interpreted the concept as not only describing the "typical" Foucauldian apparatuses (prisons, schools, discipline, or

confession) but also computers, cellphones, and other objects with “the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings” (2009:14). He adds, which is essential also for my argument, that apparatuses are first and foremost “machines” for producing subjectivities (Agamben, 2009:20).

Most of Foucault’s studies examine how power is exercised *against* subjects through particular apparatuses, discourses, and technologies, rather than how subjects negotiate or resist it in their practices. In this sense, the common criticism of these theories as being monolithic are not completely uncalled for. Yet, Foucault maintained that, in principle, power can only be exercised over subjects who within structured “fields of possibilities” are free to act differently (Foucault, 1982:790). The conduct of conduct *presupposes* subjects who are free to act in different ways. If subjects are unfree and their actions pre-determined, no exercise of power is needed. Yet, freedom is always entangled with power, which means that humans are neither pre-determined, nor completely free to shape their lives as they see fit.

What needs to be emphasized in relation to Foucauldian research that emphasizes subjection over resistance is that power is never totalizing: It does not determine actions as much as “it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action” (Foucault, 1982:789). Subjects can resist, refuse, develop oppositional subjectivities, and counter-conduct — the latter is what Foucault used to describe the “struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others” (2007a:268) — by developing tactics alternative to those imposed by apparatuses. However, resistance does not come from the outside of power, but is rather immanent to it (Ettlinger, 2018:5). This means that power and resistance are intertwined, and that acts of resistance may both challenge and reinforce power structures in non-predictable ways (cf. Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009).

## **Subjection, subjectivation, and technologies of the self**

Following the discussions above, I see subjectivities as being formed through the relations between individuals and particular apparatuses, discourses, and technologies. The production of subjectivity cannot be collapsed into a dichotomy of structure/agency. Following Mezzadra’s (2018:12) discussion, I see subjectivities as being formed in the tensions between *subjection* (attempts at social shaping) and *subjectivation* (practices of active self-formation). In more conventional sociological language, this entails processes of socialization, by which the norms and values of society are both internalized, negotiated, and acted upon by subjects.

While the distinction between subjection and subjectivation is not explicitly developed by Foucault himself, it corresponds to another distinction of his, namely, the distinction between *technologies of domination* and *technologies of the self* (Foucault, 1988a). Governmentality, according to Foucault (1988a:19), occurs at

the intersection of technologies for dominating others and those directed at the self, the latter referring to the practices through which subjects govern and form relations to themselves. Foucault famously wrote that there are “two meanings of the word ‘subject’: subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge” (1982:781). In line with this, I maintain that people become subjects with a sense of self by, on the one hand, being subjected to the technologies of domination of particular apparatuses, and on the other hand, by establishing a reflexive relation to themselves through active processes of subjectivation, involving different technologies of the self.

While subjection relates well to the technologies of domination used in and around the workplace to manage and discipline workers, it is also a discursive process which operates by labeling individuals, imposing subject positions, and producing vocabularies and knowledge through which subjects can understand themselves and each other. Technologies of domination “categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him” (Foucault, 1982:781). By addressing and labelling subjects, technologies of domination produce knowledge and set up normative frames for how these subjects are supposed to act. A labor platform might, for instance, impose piece-based working models and the label of “independent contractor” on cultural workers. Such knowledge is performative and creates expectations on, but do not determine, actions and self-understandings (Hansen Löfstrand & Jacobsson, 2022:4).

In this sense, subjection can be likened to what Althusser called “interpellation”, by which people are “hailed” to govern their actions and recognize themselves as subjects within certain discursive frameworks and apparatuses reflecting state power and capital. Althusser (2008/1971:56) writes (*italics in original*):

*The individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection ‘all by himself’. There are no subjects except by and for their subjection.*

If interpellation/subjection is completely “successful” (which it seldom, if ever, is), an individual not only accepts her interpellated subject position but also views this position as a more or less natural and self-evident reflection of “who I really am”. Althusser’s classic example is the cop who says, “Hey, you!”, making the individual turn around, and in doing so, recognizing itself by the hail, becoming a subject. Yet, in contrast to the totalizing anti-humanism of Althusser, I argue that the individual turning around cannot be presupposed. In Althusser’s framework, there is little or no room to resist subjection and develop counter-subjectivities: The subject is a pure, singular effect of power and capital (Eagleton, 1991:145). This makes it important to also highlight ambivalent processes of *subjectivation* — how we develop and negotiate our subjectivities in relation to the interpellations of power.

Governmentality, in principle, leaves more room than Althusser for emphasizing the counter-practices to subjection — the processes of subjectivation through which we form relations to ourselves. As Dean (2010:43p) writes, apparatuses and

regimes of government do not *determine* forms of subjectivity. They elicit, promote, facilitate, foster and attribute various capacities, qualities and statuses to particular agents. They are successful to the extent that these agents come to experience themselves through such capacities (e.g. of rational decision-making), qualities (e.g. as having a sexuality) and statuses (e.g. as being an active citizen).

In practice, however, many prominent governmentality researchers have, similar to Althusser, emphasized subjection over subjectivation. Dean (2010:44), for instance, does not focus on the cases where subjection fails or on the interactions between subjects and apparatuses, but rather emphasizes how technologies of government *attempt* to make subjects identify with particular aims. Bröckling (2016:10p) states that he is not concerned with the effects that certain technologies and rationalities have on subjects. Rose (1999:41) similarly proposes to study the formation of subjects through the “multiple history of the objectifications of human being within the discourses that would govern them, and their subjectification in diverse practices and techniques” of government. For him, governmentality starts “by asking what authorities of various sorts wanted to happen, in relation to problems defined how, in pursuit of what objectives, through what strategies and techniques” (1999:20) rather than how individuals relate to these strategies.

To counteract this tendency in the literature on governmentality to focus on institutions and textual material rather than the experiences of subjects, I propose an ethnographic approach to governmentality and subject formation. In line with, for instance, Hansen Löfstrand and Jacobsson (2022), I argue for the importance of studying concrete actors when they come into contact with power and discourses. By highlighting the distinction between subjection and subjectivation, I think we can work around the critique that Foucauldian research neglects the agency of individuals (see Villadsen, 2023). How actual people negotiate, develop, or resist the labels and identities they are subjected to is in no way pre-determined. As mentioned, a key concept here is *technologies of the self*, which was important in the later works of Foucault. It refers to the

intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria (Foucault, 1988b:10p).

I understand technologies of the self as referring to the micro-political, performative practices of self-governing and self-actualization by which subjectivities are formed and enacted, and by which individuals form knowledge about themselves and work on, improve, optimize, monitor, and govern themselves to become a particular kind

of subject. Self-technologies often align with the interests of particular ideologies and forms of domination, such as when cultural workers willingly identify as enterprising, self-responsible workers doing piece work. However, they can also result in the formation of oppositional subjectivities and conduct.

I identify several technologies of the self in the later chapters. I can mention two examples here. In chapter 5, I discuss patchworking as a technology of the self through which workers constitute themselves as flexible piece-workers. In chapter 7, I frame self-branding as a technology by which subjects relate to themselves as commodities. Both of these occur in relation to systems subjecting them to various demands, yet still allow them to retain a sense of agency, get ahead, and cope with a precarious working life. These examples show the duality of subjectivation, where subjects both negotiate the normative expectations/interpellations they are subjected to as well as use them in productive ways for themselves.

To take it a step further, my interviews with the freelancers also functioned as technologies of the self. By asking them to discuss their professional identities, values, dreams, and so on, they constitute themselves as subjects through our talk (while I simultaneously form my researcher subjectivity). To borrow an insight from the discourse psychology of Potter and Wetherell (1987), when talking about or enacting themselves, individuals can draw on discursive categories and utilize them strategically as cultural and rhetoric resources, part of larger linguistic and discursive repertoires, when forming their subjectivities. Rather than reflecting individuals' inner essences, these are used to "construct versions of the social world" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987:33) and of oneself. Attending to how people draw on cultural and discursive resources for relating to themselves, their work, and others allow for a more open approach to subject formation, which does not assume that discourses have certain constitutive effects (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011).

I here propose *negotiation* as a useful analytical term that can bring the perspective of governmentality down to concrete lived experiences. Subjects are not dupes who uncritically internalize or adapt to the technologies of domination that they are subjected to, but actively negotiate these in their conduct by drawing on particular discursive repertoires and resources. Sometimes, they act in accordance with them; at other times, they resist them (see Scharff, 2016; Norbäck, 2021a). Acknowledging negotiation — for instance, how digital freelancers negotiate the need to engage in unpaid labor, or how they negotiate their employment status as solo self-employed — allows for a more dynamic understanding of how subjectivities are formed by actors in their situated everyday lives.

Some individuals negotiate particular subject positions with enthusiasm ("This is who I am, and I like it!"), others with insecurity and self-doubt ("This is how I should be, but I have trouble acting accordingly"), still others with cynicism or irony ("This is really quite stupid, but I act the part anyway"). Individuals might also resist or react by developing autonomous counter-conduct and counter-subjectivities. However, acting against dominant discourses and subject positions often has consequences — social exclusion, economic marginalization, legal sanctions, et

cetera. Therefore, subjection and subjectification are normalizing processes. They establish certain behaviors, subjectivities, and ways of being as hegemonic and normative, and others as deviant, sick, criminal, perverse, irresponsible, irrational, unthinkable, and so on. Nevertheless, how people form their subjectivities is an empirical question that cannot be deduced from texts, programs, policies, or laws.

### **Biopower, enterprise, and the neoliberal governing of freedom**

The notions of biopolitics and biopower are useful for understanding dispersed forms of power by which laboring subjects govern themselves and shape their subjectivities in accordance with the logics of the free market, competition, and entrepreneurship. I diverge somewhat from how Foucault used these concepts. He developed them in his late lectures (2002, 2008) to describe a power paradigm that has developed since the 18th century that targets “life itself” (*bios*). He argues that, with the emergence of the modern liberal state, the statistical regulation and control of the *population* in terms of “health, hygiene, birthrate, life expectancy, race” (Foucault, 2008:317) and so on, became central governmental objectives.

The link between biopolitics and labor mostly remains implicit in Foucault’s own writings, but he does at points explicitly write that technologies of biopower are intertwined with the need of increasing productivity in capitalist production. Biopower, he writes, aims to use the “population as a machine for producing, producing riches, goods, producing other individuals” (Foucault, 2007b:161). In other places, Foucault (2002:142) points out that biopolitics has developed in close connection with the expansion of capitalism: By seeking to maximize the health and capabilities of the population, it has directly catered to capital’s need for a productive labor force. To connect back to the beginning of the chapter, it can thus be connected to the reproduction of labor power (see Negri, 2011).

In contrast to the disciplinary power famously described in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1995), which attempts to control the most minute behavior of individuals and dressing them into docile bodies with clear aims in mind, biopower aims to steer *collectives* in certain directions for certain aims (to increase aggregated productivity or reduce state spending, for instance). Celis Bueno (2017:155p) summarizes that biopolitics — exercised through local technologies of biopower — “‘lets things happen’ [...] in order to identify patterns and curves of normality that define the degree to which those who enforce power must intervene or not to achieve the correct steering of the multiplicities”. Biopower thus largely relies on our capabilities for *self-governing*: A key concept for understanding the connections between power and freelance labor that is often decoupled from strict workplace discipline and managerial control, with freelancers often taking pride in “being their own boss” and managing themselves and their work process.

I do not see biopower as having superseded disciplinary power in some linear fashion. Biopolitical and disciplinary apparatuses often co-exist and overlap. While biopower in certain aspects might better align with digital freelancers, they are

subjected both to disciplinary power and biopower. In terms of disciplinary power, creative labor platforms like Upwork does, for instance, subject freelancers to strict disciplinary control, where each click and scroll is monitored and recorded six times per hour in work diaries, which then becomes the basis for billing clients (Sutherland et al., 2020). The algorithmic management used in parts of the gig economy has been described as forms of digital Taylorism (Altenried, 2020) or as an algorithmic panopticon (e.g., Woodcock, 2020) with distinctly disciplinary elements.

Compared to such disciplinary technologies, I understand biopower to work through an “instrumentalization of life attributes” (Fleming, 2014b:885) by orienting everyday life toward the market and processes of economization. Biopower attempts to “shape, sculpt, mobilize and work through the choices, desires, aspirations, needs, wants and lifestyles of individuals or groups” (Dean, 2010:20) so that subjects willingly act in certain ways, not only at work but also in their everyday lives. Despite the biological connotations, it is concerned with governing humans in their broader social, economic, and cultural environment: in their families, at work, and in their lifestyles (cf. Dean, 2010:119).

Of particular importance for digital freelancers are the connections between self-governing and self-enterprise, which can be traced to Foucault’s lecture series *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008) from 1978–1979. While he studied how biopolitics emerged at the end of the 18th century, he also applied these ideas to then-emerging neoliberal forms of governmentality. Analyzing the writings of the neoliberal Chicago School of Economics and of German ordoliberalists,<sup>7</sup> he argued they constructed models for a society where social institutions are modeled on enterprise and regulated through mechanisms of competition and free trade. According to Foucault (2008:148), it is the “multiplication of the ‘enterprise’ form within the social body [which] is at stake in neo-liberal policy. It is a matter of making the market, competition, and so the enterprise, into what could be called the formative power of society”. While it can be discussed to which extent the enterprise really has become fully formative for society or Sweden specifically, there has, as discussed in chapter 2, certainly been extensive transformations in this direction.

While both classical liberalism and neoliberalism according to Foucault has the *homo oeconomicus* as its ideal subject, neoliberalism reconceptualizes this subject from a partner of exchange to that of an entrepreneur. In his readings of early neoliberal theory, Foucault (2008:226) finds that the enterprise form is extended to the individual who is conceptualized as an “entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings”. In the neoliberal theories of Gary S. Becker, Foucault (2008:220pp) analyses the concept of *human capital* and how it extends an

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<sup>7</sup> Ordoliberalism, which Foucault analyzes as a clear break with classical liberalism, was centered around the journal *Ordo* and is associated with scholars from the German Freiburg school such as Walter Eucken and Franz Böhm. They argued that the key role of the state should be to sustain and facilitate competition on the free market (Foucault, 2008:103pp).



economic vocabulary to individuals, proposing that all the choices we make — in careers, marriage, children, education, health, social relations, and so on — should be analyzed in terms of costs and benefits and as “investments in ourselves” that can pay off further ahead.

Building upon these insights, later Foucauldian researchers have, in a number of different settings (mostly through textual material), analyzed the dispersion of norms of enterprise, competition, risk-taking, and individual responsibility through which the “enterprising self” or “entrepreneurial self” has become an idealized neoliberal subject (Bröckling, 2016). Brown (2005:41) notes that the neoliberal conditions of the free market must be protected by the state not only through policy and law but also through “the dissemination of social norms designed to facilitate competition, free trade, and rational economic action on the part of every member and institution of society”. More than regulating the economy, this implies making subjects *govern themselves* in ways that promote enterprise in all spheres of life.

The emphasis on making people govern themselves in line with the market makes *freedom* a central area of control and contestation. I understand biopower to operate through the freedom of subjects, by working on their desires, dreams, and choices while simultaneously limiting, controlling and enforcing how the freedom can be exercised (cf. Foucault, 2008:63p). Rose (1999:68pp) argues that technologies of biopower under neoliberalism in particular govern subjects through their freedom as rational market actors. The paradox here, as he points out, is that individuals are “not merely ‘free to choose’, but obliged to be free, to understand and enact their lives in terms of choice” (Rose, 1999:87). This is not to say that neoliberalism creates an “illusion” of freedom, given that how we understand and experience freedom always is socially and discursively mediated and negotiated.

As examples, the logic of human capital blurs boundaries between work and non-work, and production and consumption (see Du Gay, 1996). It asks subjects to engage in continuous self-improvement, self-introspection, self-optimization, self-responsibilization, and self-management — examples of technologies of the self — in order to increase their productivity and skills and to become more efficient and successful on the market. Furthermore, it asks the subject to see personal responsibility, market autonomy, and competition as fundamentally liberating, positive, and empowering elements (Bröckling, 2016; Norbäck, 2021a).

Pressures be entrepreneurial and self-responsible are today directed to all workers, not just traditional entrepreneurs. By framing gig workers as “independent contractors”, labor platforms for instance impose entrepreneurial norms on them, all while selling this as a fundamental freedom (Purcell & Brook, 2022). The legal status of solo self-employment in itself works as a technology of biopower which, through regulations, demand that freelancers identify with entrepreneurial activities. However, entrepreneurialism works as what Maury (2023) calls a transversal tendency, which produces different and fragmented forms of entrepreneurialism and precarity for different segments of workers along both gendered, class-based, and racialized lines.

Discourses about entrepreneurial selves and human capital re-configure the relation between workers and capital. In relation to freelance work, clients are typically less interested in inputs (how many hours someone work, where they work, how work is done) than outputs (what is produced and how much it costs). However, this does not signal an absence of power. Today “capital wants a situation where command resides within the subject him- or herself”, as Lazzarato (1996:136) argues. Lessening disciplinary control by giving more flexibility to freelancers can at the same time be profitable: What matters is less the control of the labor process than the extraction of value from workers who self-organize and manage themselves and who take costs and risks upon themselves (Fleming, 2014a).

How discourses around the entrepreneurial self and human capital “hit the ground” is ambiguous and contradictory and cannot be predetermined (Hansen Löfstrand & Jacobsson, 2022). Individuals relate to this figure in different ways, which again highlights the importance of ethnographically studying how individuals encounter, negotiate, and resist governmentality in their everyday lives (see Norbäck, 2021a). While this is seldom done in governmentality studies, which usually focuses on how power is exercised “from above”, I argue that such a focus is necessary to make this framework more sociologically dynamic and nuanced.

## Platforms: Digital governmentality and self-branding

Digital freelancers’ large reliance on digital platforms for finding and carrying out work makes it necessary to theorize the role of platforms in relation to their work. Combing the insights from the previous chapter, in this section, I argue that platforms have become both instruments of extraction which extract value from the non-waged activities of users, and instruments of governmentality which give rise to particular forms of subjectivation. I also discuss self-branding through platforms.

### **Digital governmentality and platform apparatuses**

In the thesis, digital platforms have previously been defined as technological infrastructures that intermediate between different user groups (such as workers, consumers, employers, companies, and advertisers) and that extract surplus value from their data, attention, affects, and activities (Scholz, 2013; Srnicek, 2017). To ground this definition in a theoretical understanding of platforms as instruments for governmentality, I propose to return to the concept of apparatus. If apparatuses, to repeat, are operationalizations of governmentality and ensembles of discursive and non-discursive elements, we can speak of specific *platform apparatuses*: ensembles of technical code, data, algorithms, protocols, terms of use, and community guidelines that govern the actions of users.

What I call platform apparatuses operate as regulatory devices that impose and govern behavioral norms through rules of conduct, interfaces, and algorithms, but also through cultural imaginaries and discourses. Platforms involve “not just technical activity, but also imply social engineering” (Rieder, 2010:51; quoted in Rouzé, 2019:7). Through algorithms, interfaces, and other design choices, platform apparatuses are designed to steer, nudge, and shape the actions of users with particular outcomes in mind, such as shaping their behavior and extracting data. They are in turn also reshaped by the actions of these users, which never can be completely prefigured or controlled.

Platform apparatuses record, store, and process the data of users algorithmically in order to steer and influence their behavior (Dammann, 2022:4). They not only orient and govern users’ conscious actions but also capture and extract value from their data traces, which can be used to influence them more discretely. In this sense, platform apparatuses function as what Mezzadra and Neilson (2019:245) call “devices of extraction”, which operate on “subjects who recursively generate data sets through which they come to be known, governed, and exploited”. Labor platforms in particular are here characterized by a dual value production (van Doorn & Badger, 2020), as they both take a rent from the services mediated on the platform (through user fees and similar) and extract data from users which can be monetized and/or used for various predictive and analytical purposes.

The ideal subject of neoliberal governmentality is, as we saw in the last section, often thought to be rational and economic. However, this view can be complicated by the fact that digital governmentality acts not only on our rational decisions but also on our affects, impulses, and desires, which might not be immediately conscious to us. Platform users are governed both as individual, rational subjects, and what Deleuze (1992a) calls *dividuals* — disparate data points which become valuable and meaningful only as aggregated clusters. According to Lazzarato (2014:37p), platforms govern us “at the junction of the individual and the dividual”.

The governing of dividuals is biopolitical in the sense originally intended by Foucault, as it is oriented towards *populations*, or clusters of subjects, aggregated into statistical sets and databanks (Cheney-Lippold, 2017). Our data as dividuals is particularly important for algorithmic power (Beer, 2017). Far from being neutral sorting mechanisms, algorithms are constructed with certain aims in mind; They are designed by engineers who have their own biases and who are affected by wider social, economic, cultural, and political norms and forces (Cotter, 2019).

Based on our data, platforms and algorithms give certain information and content visibility, making “objects appear before us in a particular normative light” (Villadsen, 2021:479). By shaping the ways in which we come to see the world and setting up limits for what is possible to do, they allow individuals certain amounts of freedom in how they can use them, what type of content they produce, and how they can communicate. This occurs not only through algorithms but also through the interfaces and design of platforms (van Dijck, 2013; Badouard et al., 2016).

One useful concept for conceptualizing digital governmentality is *affordances* (Ettlinger, 2018; Davis, 2020). While popular for studying human-machine and computer-based interactions, particularly in the field of STS, it is rarely used in Foucauldian studies. However, I argue that it goes very well with a governmentality approach and that it can work to overcome the view of agency-less subjects (cf. Villadsen, 2023). Affordances can be understood as a set of possible actions permitted by a structural milieu, such as a platform apparatus. Davis (2020:6) writes that “affordances mediate between a technology’s features and its outcomes. Technologies don’t *make* people do things but instead, push, pull, enable, and constrain. Affordances are how objects shape actions for socially situated subjects”. In this sense, technological affordances lend themselves very well in shaping the self-governing of subjects, describing how platforms set up “normative proposition[s] for action” (Badouard et al., 2016:6) for the conduct of conduct.

Davis (2020:65pp) presents a set of “mechanisms of affordance” that I think are illustrative also for digital governmentality. First, she argues that affordances operate through requests or demands. Facebook might request that users upload a picture of themselves but users can choose whether to follow or reject this request. In contrast, demands “exert a strong degree of force” (Davis, 2020:68), which makes other actions difficult or impossible. For instance, Facebook may demand that users specify which gender they identify as. Secondly, Davis (2020:71) suggests that technological systems react to actions either through encouragement (making actions visible and easy to execute), discouragement (allowing the possibility of the actions but erecting barriers) or refusal (making actions untenable or impossible).

The notion of affordances and the mechanisms identified by Davis can help us explore not only how platform apparatuses control, steer, and govern the actions of users but also how users strategically come up with actions that were not intended by the engineers. As Foucault (1982:790) asserts, while the “fields of possibilities” of apparatuses are highly structured, users can still reshape them through their actions and develop counter-conduct and resistance against how they are governed through them. Resistance to digital governmentality can entail subverting, tweaking, and appropriating algorithmic systems and processes for one’s own purposes. These practices might not immediately challenge platform apparatuses but can eventually bring about change or disruption (see Ettlinger, 2018).

The possibility to develop counter-conduct against platform apparatuses always exists, but how individuals relate to platforms and algorithms differs. Some might be relatively unaware of how their online activity is subject to processes of datafication, capture, algorithmic management, surveillance, or nudging and how these processes translate them into individual, algorithmic identities (Cheney-Lippold, 2017:26). Others, as Ettlinger (2018:4) points out, might be “conscious and knowledgeable about their subjection, and some act on this agency to claim their rights to privacy, freedom, and citizen action”. Some might be roughly aware of how digital governmentality works without having the interest, time, or energy to

act on this knowledge: Others might act against such systems purely based on affective reactions, like frustration, fascination, or feelings of being wronged.

If nothing else, digital freelancers — and here they differ from other kinds of gig workers that might be more dependent on a specific labor platform for their income — often have the possibility of opting out of particular platforms. As I argue in chapter 5, platform apparatuses used by these workers must thus be seen as relational and existing in a wider “dynamic cross-platform ecology” (Poell et al., 2022:110) where different platform apparatuses afford different actions. Freelancers can pick platforms that best suit their interests and leave platforms that only seem exploitative or unjust, exercising a form of counter-conduct.

### **Self-branding and platform imaginaries**

To find work and valorize themselves on the market, digital freelancers often engage in practices of *self-branding* on platforms. While self-branding practices can be traced back to the emergence of celebrity culture in the early 20th century and even earlier, they have, with digitalization, become ubiquitous and a central strategy for independent workers to manage themselves in digital labor markets (cf. Duffy & Pooley, 2019). I see self-branding as a kind of immaterial labor. By producing symbolic and affective narratives around the self that seem “authentic” to an imagined audience, self-branding seeks to valorize one’s subjectivity for reputation and attention, hopefully translating into economic gain (Hearn, 2008).

The notion of *authenticity* is central for self-branding, but also highly ambiguous. It refers to a need to engage in modes of self-presentation that seem true and genuine while also strategically tailoring affective self-presentations to dominant scripts, symbols, and images of consumer culture, as well as the algorithms, affordances, and user-cultures of particular platforms. For cultural workers, this also involves negotiating tensions between the values of art worlds and commercial worlds. Embracing commercialism has in artistic fields historically often been accused as an act of “selling out” and giving up one’s creative autonomy and authenticity (Banks, 2007; Klein et al., 2017). By further blurring boundaries between branded and non-branded content through corporate sponsorships and influencer collaborations, platforms put a new twist to these tensions (Scolere, 2019).

Retaining a coherence between appearance and “reality” is, according to the freelancers I interviewed, necessary for successful authentic self-branding. This entails a strategic staging of subjectivity in relation to certain norms and scripts for expected behavior, similar to what Goffman (1990:132) calls “impression management”, which involves both sincere and cynical self-performances. I argue there is a strong performative (cf. Butler, 1990) element to this staging, through which subjectivity is formed and transformed. As noted by Bröckling (2016:35), “Self-marketing would miss its mark if it were mere role play. You must actually become what you want to come across as”. If promoting and branding oneself is akin to a roleplay, then it is a play in which one’s participation simultaneously

reproduces one's subjectivity and sense of self. Self-branding is thus tied to particular technologies of the self.

There are gendered norms for how male and female freelancers and creators are expected to brand themselves to clients and potential followers (cf. Duffy, 2017). Self-branding also produces segmentation and inequality along the lines of class, race, and sexuality — inequalities which have been shown to be reproduced through the algorithms of different digital platforms (Glatt, 2022). Furthermore, how to successfully market oneself is sector-specific. Although different groups of cultural workers might be required to incorporate elements of themselves and their private lives into their branding efforts, influencers or “mum bloggers” (cf. Archer, 2019) face different requirements and norms on how to incorporate their personal subjectivity and how to negotiate boundaries between their personal and professional lives than, say, graphic designers or illustrators (cf. Scolere, 2019).

Self-branding puts demands on reflexivity, in the sense that the subject should be able to engage in introspection and self-evaluation to choose how to best present oneself in a “sellable”, authentic manner. Yet, going back to the duality of immaterial labor discussed earlier in the chapter, self-branding not only requires reflexivity as a skill but also commodifies it and turns it into a product (Wee & Brooks, 2010). Abilities to reflexively commodify and market the self have, in themselves, become part of what freelancers offer to clients.

Self-branding aims to turn the reflexive production of subjectivity into reputation, which functions as an immaterial currency on platform apparatuses (Gandini, 2016). Reputation is measured through metrics such as number of followers, likes, and engagement on social media platforms, or job success scores, response rates, and customer ratings on labor platforms like Upwork and Fiverr. Such metrics relate to distinct forms of algorithmic management that set up rules for visibility and filter content through obtuse systems. Although some workers can establish a reputation for themselves that extends over the whole platform economy and even beyond it, particular platform apparatuses might also try to make freelancers dependent on their internal reputation systems, as I show in chapter 5.

As is increasingly recognized, digital self-branding is platform-specific in the sense that the algorithms and affordances of different platforms encourage different ways of promoting the self (Scolere et al., 2018; Scolere, 2019; Poell et al., 2022). Selling the self on Instagram the same way as on LinkedIn or Upwork might not only be ineffective but could also potentially scare away potential customers if it displays a lack of understanding of particular platforms. Instead, content and self-presentations must be tailored to the affordances and user-cultures of specific platforms. At the same time, there can be expectations to present a coherent self over different platforms. Marwick and boyd (2011) talk of “context collapse” to highlight how platforms mash several different audiences together into one context, which creates challenges for users to handle the expectations of different audiences.

Algorithms are often called “black boxes” which produce information asymmetry. This creates uncertainty and precarity for those who are dependent on

them to make a living. Bucher (2017) argues that users must adapt content to various *imaginaries* of how platforms and algorithms work. Failing to do so comes with the threat of what she calls “algorithmic invisibility”, which can make it next to impossible to reach out with content and build a brand and reputation for oneself. Algorithmic imaginaries — “ways of thinking about what algorithms are, what they should be and how they function” (Bucher, 2017:39p) — are central for workers’ self-branding practices online, by which they can avoid invisibility and make themselves “algorithmically recognizable” (Gillespie, 2017). Part of the immaterial labor of self-branding thus consists of researching platforms and algorithms in order to know how to best adapt one’s self-branding efforts to them.

Imaginaries of platforms and algorithms can be developed through individual trial-and-error interactions with particular platform algorithms and also by engaging in collective sense-making and interaction with other freelancers in online communities and networks where speculative information and tricks around algorithms and engagement tactics often are shared. This has been called “algorithmic gossip” (Bishop, 2019) and “algorithmic lore” (MacDonald, 2023), notions which point to how the social collaboration and knowledge of immaterial labor also can help freelancers manage situations characterized by uncertainty.

## Self-precarization: Governing through precarity

Building on the understanding of subjectification above, this thesis aims to understand how precarious work is being normalized and how digital freelancers form their subjectivities in relation to an insecure and contingent labor market. As we saw in chapter 2, the literature on precarious work is large and varied, where concepts like precarity, the precariat, precarization, and precariousness have quite different meanings. The following section outlines how I approach precarization. Putting the Marxian and Foucauldian traditions more directly in dialogue with each other, I discuss how the governing and subjectivation of digital freelancers intersect with contemporary forms of exploitation and labor insecurity.

### **Precarization, fragmentation, and multiplication of labor**

Precarization is, in this thesis, understood as a heterogenous and dynamic process which is interlinked both with capital accumulation and the production of subjectivity (Lorey, 2015; Alberti et al., 2018; Armano et al., 2022). As a process, I argue that precarization today renders working life insecure not only for low-skilled workers “at the margins” of society (cf. Vosko, 2011) but increasingly also for its once-secure middle-layers. In line with a Foucauldian understanding of power, I see precarization as both productive and normalizing: It is productive for capital not only by producing new terrains for exploitation and extraction but also productive

in the sense that it creates and normalizes new forms of life and subjectivities. This goes against common understandings of precarization as a purely negative process that comes from “outside” to disrupt a supposed normality of secure work.

Lorey (2015) uses the term *governmental precarization* to describe instruments and technologies of governing through insecurity. Whereas the welfare state during much of the 20th century sought to immunize workers against precarity, she describes governmental precarization as operating on a threshold of acceptable levels of social vulnerability, where it balances the maximization of insecurity with minimizing social safety nets (Lorey, 2015:65p). This mode of governing is biopolitical, as it fully relies on the self-governing of populations; It “embraces the whole of existence, the body, modes of subjectivation” (Lorey, 2015:1). By producing lifestyles, subjectivities, and affective ways of relating to one’s work where precarity becomes something taken for granted, governmental precarization makes insecurity into a new normal against which subjects are expected to govern themselves and understand their lives. Instead of being threatening to society, precarization today is a “political-economic instrument” (Lorey, 2015:39).

Precarization as a mode of governmentality is tied to modes of subjection — ways of “making people precarious” (Armano and Murgia, 2017:48) and shaping their subjectivities so that they understand and govern themselves in relation to fragmented labor markets. Just as Fordist industries utilized disciplinary apparatuses not only to control labor processes but also to produce its normative worker-citizens and mass-consumers, contemporary labor markets need to produce subjects who reflect the demands of being independent, flexible, entrepreneurial, creative, tech-savvy, communicative, and cooperative — immaterial characteristics that might allow them to better traverse a precarious world of work, but which capital coincidentally also seeks to valorize and subsume today, as previously argued.

From a Marxian perspective, the “production of subjectivity” here has a double meaning: It both examines how working subjectivities are formed and emphasizes “the productive power of subjectivity, its capacity to produce wealth” (Read, 2003:102). Marxian scholars point out that capital as a social relation produces not only objects but also subjects who fit a given regime of accumulation (Mezzadra, 2018; Read, 2022). As Marx (1993:512) already noted, the “production of capitalists and wage labourers is [...] a chief product of capital’s realization process”. The capital relation produces different *figures of labor* (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013) — particular collective subjectivities, such as digital freelancers — which enable diversified forms of labor and exploitation, yet also contain seeds of resistance.

While I argue that precarization affects labor markets more generally today, it is by no means a monolithic process. It means different things in different national contexts and is experienced differently by different worker segments. Precarization produces difference along the lines of class, gender, race, and ethnicity, and creates different patterns of precarity, both in terms of objective conditions and subjective experiences (Alberti et al., 2018). Mezzadra and Neilson (2013:88) argue that what they call the *multiplication of labor* — characterized by labor intensification,



diversification, and heterogenization — is constitutive for contemporary capitalism. The multiplication of labor complements older forms of division of labor with the production of fragmented and diverse contractual models and worker subjects which facilitate new forms of exploitation. This becomes even more visible in platform capitalism. As Altenried (2022:110) points out, platforms need not create standardizable “mass-workers” as during the days of the Taylorist factory, but rather rely on heterogenous and globally distributed figures of labor which can work from anywhere and at any time over different forms of contracts.

### **Self-precarization and self-exploitation**

To analyze how digital freelancers in the cultural industries govern themselves in relation to precariousness, I draw on Lorey’s (2011) notion of *self-precarization*. Regarding cultural workers, she argues that flexible but insecure working conditions are not only imposed out of necessity but often actively desired and sought out — whether they consider steady and secure work as an unattainable goal or something monotonous they want to avoid, the creative career path today tends to be understood as a free and autonomous choice. This is striking also in my informants’ narratives. Whether they voice critique against precarious working circumstances or state that they enjoy uncertainty because it makes things exciting and unpredictable, in most accounts, the understanding that you are in charge of your own life seems crucial for their sense of self.

Lorey (2011) does not explicitly spell out and develop the conceptual duality of self-precarization: I argue that the concept entails both a self-chosen form of precarization and a precarization *of the self*. Lorey (2011) uses self-chosen precarization and self-precarization more or less interchangeably, but she tends to focus more on the first dimension, that is, how work with precarious conditions becomes an individual choice. Cultural workers, she writes, are

engaged in extremely diverse, unequally paid project activities and fee-paying jobs [...]. Sometimes they do not want a steady job at all; sometimes they know it is something they can only dream about. Yet such cultural producers start from the assumption that they have chosen their living and working conditions themselves, precisely to ensure that they develop the essence of their being to the maximum. (Lorey, 2011:84)

Despite the structural imposition of precarious work on cultural workers through the lack of employed positions, precarious work is not solely imposed “from above” in a top-down fashion. As we have seen in previous chapters, cultural workers often willingly choose to enter these markets *despite* knowing that they entail much insecurity, low wages, and no guarantee of success. In this way, workers themselves can be said to become drivers of precarization.

Self-precarization can also refer to a precarization *of* the self, which reflects not just a “destabilization through employment, but also destabilization of the conduct of life and [...] of bodies” (Lorey, 2015:13). By blurring boundaries between work and non-work, and choice and necessity, self-precarization produces uncertain livelihoods, makes it difficult to plan ahead, and impels constant activity to stay in the race. My data shows a tendency for work to seep into everyday life, orienting it toward insecure work that “absorbs life, the passions and desires, and then unloads imbalance and conflict onto the same life” (Armano et al., 2022:37).

At the same time, in contrast to Lorey’s emphasis on destabilization, I argue that self-precarization can only be normalizing because it also produces a subjective sense of stability, meaning, and coherence. My data shows how digital freelancers often enjoy their work and attach many positive affects to it — pride, self-worth, inspiration, joy, and so on. Most of them refuse to identify with any kind of victimization discourse. Self-precarization thus also seems to provide a sense of stability in a social context shaped by contingency, by allowing workers to identify with fragmented yet “passionate” work, where insecurity is a normal part of their day-to-day life. This shows the productive side of self-precarization.

By anchoring the concept of self-precarization in ethnographic data, I aim to make Lorey’s philosophical theorization more nuanced and sociologically grounded. How different workers negotiate precarity must be an empirical question. To come closer to these processes, I propose that self-precarization provides vocabularies and discursive resources by which subjects can make sense of, explain, negotiate, and account for their situation in the face of uncertainty. Analyzing how workers draw on such discursive resources shows how precarization shapes even minute interactions and considerations. By focusing on workers’ negotiations of precarity, we see how this can also create resistance, alternative practices, and counter-conduct, which makes self-precarization ambiguous and full of tensions.

Far from being passively subjected to precarious circumstances, I thus argue that self-precarization points to the active engagement and negotiation of subjects in the encounter with precariousness. From my material, it seems that self-precarizing subjectivities are often formed in the tensions between empowerment and subjection — between the idea of being an autonomous, free individual and being engaged in exploitative labor relations (cf. Lorey, 2015:13). While the flexible and digital world of work for some is perceived as an empowering “liberation” from older forms of exploitation, it simultaneously produces new forms of exploitation which are more tightly connected to the subjectivities of workers.

Self-precarization can produce positive and meaningful forms of identification, but the conviction that these conditions are self-chosen also makes workers susceptible to accepting conditions of inequality, insecurity, and exploitation. As particularly evident in the debates around the gig economy, ideas that we are all our own entrepreneurs, responsible for our own success, can mask real relations of exploitation by framing them as issues of *self*-exploitation — a technology of biopower that can be understood as a subject’s “over-identification with his or her

own domination” (Fleming, 2014a:172). Based on my material, this over-identification can make workers push themselves to their physical, mental, and economic limits and even take on debt (cf. Lazzarato, 2012) based on belief in their own individual autonomy and that it will “pay off” in the future.

Yet, I maintain that self-precarization operates through desires, dreams, fantasies, and aspirations that cannot be fully captured or rendered profitable, and which in principle also contain the potential to create new subjectivities and ways of living. Using a notion from Deleuze and Guattari (1988), McRobbie (2016:91) frames the dreams and aspirations of creative and passionate work through self-employment as a *line of flight* through which young women in particular seek to escape the drudgery of monotonous work and lifelong careers. She emphasizes that this does not necessarily equate “upward mobility; instead it is an ideological effect, giving young people, especially young women, the feel of being middle class and aspirational” (McRobbie, 2016a: 11). Nevertheless, as I also show in chapter 8, self-precarization often involves desires to create a more meaningful life for oneself. The very contingency of self-precarization carries potential for new forms of life.

For some, discourses about creativity and artistic work are important for how they form their subjectivities and how they orient themselves to precarious work. The freelancers I interviewed often relate to ideas of being creative, passionate, and self-realized through work as well as the importance of “doing what you love”. As McRobbie finds, the appeals and interpellations to be creative “are encouraging rather than coercive, and the imperative to ‘be creative’ is an invitation to consider one’s own capabilities, to embark on a voyage of self-discovery” (McRobbie, 2016a:15). She adds, “Insecurity is seen as part of the adventure”.

The naturalization of risk, uncertainty, and insecurity as unavoidable or even positive also links self-precarization to the entrepreneurial forms of selfhood discussed earlier. The intersection of precarization and entrepreneurialization may produce what Armano et al. (2022:30) call “precarious-enterprise workers”, which relates to risk-taking and uncertainty as character-building or as investments in their human capital. Self-precarization can give the subject a sense of coherence in the face of uncertainty. Reoccurring frames of reasoning in my material are explanations such as “Sure, things may be uncertain, but at least I’ve chosen them to be like this myself” or “You know, precarity is not so bad. It can be exciting. It keeps you on your toes”. Such ambivalent affective investments in one’s work “may recast precarity itself as a desirable outcome of work” (Cockayne, 2016:457), and as something which one has willingly opted in for. Yet, it might also split the subject, making the very idea of the “coherent subject” precarious.

### **Fantasy, hope, and cruel optimism**

The concept of *fantasy* is one lens through which to understand self-precarization. Following Berlant, fantasies can be understood as “the means by which people hoard idealizing theories and tableaux about how they and the world ‘add up to

something” (2011:2). How we lead our lives is always tied up with fantasies and imaginaries of what we, for instance, consider the “good life” to be. According to Berlant (2011:2pp), fantasies about idealized future states — which seldom originate from the subject herself but rather are normative and shaped in social contexts — represent an optimistic affective attachment to desired states or objects which are not yet realized. By acting according to idealized fantasies about the good life, we can make our current situation understandable, meaningful, and tolerable, which allows us to persist even in tough situations. At the same time, forming attachments to “problematic” objects — say, an abusive partner, a stressful job, or a precarious artistic career — which might not materialize into what we desire, can also give rise to feelings of depression, anxiety, cynicism, or resignation.

Berlant (2011:24) calls the condition of “maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object” that is difficult or impossible to realize *cruel optimism*. What is cruel about these particular attachments, according to Berlant (2011:24), is that regardless of what the content of the attachment is, “the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living and to look forward to being in the world”. In other words, the fantasies are so highly integrated with one’s subjectivity and self-understanding, that severing the attachment to the problematic object may seem more dangerous than upholding it. Clinging on to various fantasies (“If I can only get a more regular flow of commissions, I will be able to stress less and have more control”) can make our situation understandable and endurable but also make us stay in situations which ultimately can be detrimental to our well-being. A career path that we think will lead to a happy life but which proves difficult to sustain or leads to anxiety, poverty, or burnout, can be an example of such cruel optimism. This is visible in some of my material, where interviewees both state the importance of their work for how they see themselves and talk about how they lie sleepless at night over not having enough commissions, or that they refer to constant anxiety over not being able to support themselves. The point here is not to give primacy to one of these narratives but rather to analyze how they co-exist and fuel each other in ambiguous ways.

As I later show, self-precarization often involves ideological fantasies temporally oriented toward the future, where the freelancer *hopes* for a life in which they will be happier and more successful, creative, well-paid, and secure than in the present. Hope is not only an affective reaction of freelance subjects but also part of how digital economies are structured. Leonardi and Chertkovskaya (2017), for instance, describe (with reference to Bascetta, [2015]) contemporary capitalism as a “political economy of promise”, where wages are substituted for promises about future employment, exposure, or visibility. As mentioned in chapter 2, others have in these contexts used concepts like *hope labor* (Kuehn & Corrigan 2013) and *aspirational labor* (Duffy, 2017). These concepts draw attention to the uncompensated work people might do in the digital economy with the hopes, desires, and aspirations of generating exposure for themselves that in turn might lead to paid work in the future. As Jarrett (2022a:96) sums up, “The currency of digital labor is hope” — hope to

sustain a freelance career, hope to get more control over one's life, hope to decide when and how to work, hope to be meaningfully paid.

Kuehn and Corrigan (2013:12) write that "hope labor functions because it is largely not experienced as exploitation or alienation, despite the commodification processes inherent to digital and cultural production". Rather than seeing these practices as exploitative, workers may see them as self-chosen investments in themselves and their human capital, which might generate exposure, reputation, and other things that will pay off further ahead. Yet, such hopes are, by definition, uncertain. We hope for things that are often beyond our control, that may be difficult to achieve, and may never happen (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013:17).

Whatever we call these optimistic, future-oriented frames and fantasies, I argue that they have an ideological function of justifying and legitimating precarious and exploitative work arrangements in the present through reference to the future. As Alacovska (2019) argues, hope is, however, also a force of endurance that is embedded in the everyday lives of people. It not only allows them to persist and make do in uncertain and tough circumstances but can also form the basis for genuine forms of solidarity and open up for futures beyond the totalizing scope of biopolitical governmentality. This duality is apparent in the processes of self-precarization, as I explore them further in this dissertation.

## Summary of the theoretical starting points

Drawing on both Marxian and Foucauldian theory, this chapter worked toward a theoretical understanding of digital freelancing as labor, and how they are formed as a figure of working subjects.

The first section focused on digital freelancing as labor. I argued for the importance of rethinking orthodox Marxist understandings of work, labor, and exploitation in order to capture the fragmented nature of this work. Through a discussion of the autonomist concepts of the social factory, immaterial labor, and affective labor, I argued that digital freelancing collapses clear boundaries between production and reproduction, as well as paid and unpaid work, and that the production of affect, desire, and subjectivity is central for their careers.

The second section discussed subjectivity by engaging with Foucault's understanding of governmentality and power as a productive force. I argued that too much governmentality research has neglected the agency of real people in negotiating attempts of being governed. It was proposed that subjectivities are formed in the tension between subjection (exercised against subjects through technologies of domination) and subjectivation (subjects shaping themselves through technologies of the self). I argued that the formation of subjectivity must be studied through an ethnographic engagement with real people. I also discussed notions of biopolitics, neoliberalism, and entrepreneurial subjectivation.

The third section discussed the role of platforms for digital freelancers. I worked toward an understanding of digital governmentality by introducing platform apparatus as a concept. I highlighted self-branding as a central instance of immaterial labor, through which workers establish a reputation for themselves — a key immaterial currency in digital freelance markets — and form their subjectivities in relation to platform affordances, algorithmic power, and modes of visibility.

Lastly, I discussed precarization as a process of subjectivation and conceptualized digital freelancers in the cultural industries as engaged in a particular form of self-precarization — a mode of precarization which, in some sense, is self-chosen and tied to positive affective attachments, desires, and fantasies. I also highlighted the role of aspirations, hopes, and fantasies in this process.

The conceptual framework allows for the ethnographic study of processes of subject formation “from the ground”. The next chapter discusses the empirical and analytical principles and considerations that have guided the research and that aims to anchor the theoretical conceptualizations in the concrete everyday realities of digital freelancers.



# Chapter 4. Methodology and material

This chapter discusses the methods, empirical material, and analytical strategies that are used in the dissertation. I begin by presenting my methodological approach and how I conceive of the field site of the study. Thereafter, I discuss the empirical material that has been collected and analyzed. Last, I discuss the analytical process. I incorporate ethical reflections continually throughout, in relation to the different concerns that have arisen regarding particular methods and types of material.

## Methodological approach: Digital ethnography

For the methodological approach of this study, I have drawn inspiration from a tradition of digital ethnography that approaches the fieldsite as a dislocated but interconnected network of both physical and digital practices and locations (Hine, 2015, 2017; Caliandro & Gandini, 2016; Burrell, 2017). The main material has been collected through semi-structured interviews with digital freelancers as well as through online observations. I combine these methods to study both the accounts of freelancers themselves, and the wider social, cultural, and discursive context in which they are active.

To understand how digital freelancers make a living, negotiate precarity, and form their subjectivities, this dissertation places great emphasis on the accounts of freelancers themselves — how they talk about their work, their professional identities, their work-related experiences, and how they relate their accounted motives, dreams, passions, and so on to various discourses about work. For this reason, I have conducted semi-structured interviews. Qualitative interviews are useful for coming close to how actors negotiate and verbalize understandings of their work situation and subjective experiences, which I argue is needed to for a more nuanced understanding of governmentality which I argued for in chapter 3. However, interviews are less useful for understanding the social and discursive environment of which actors are a part. Furthermore, I do not view interviews as a method which necessarily gives access to what people “really” think or do outside of the interview situation. Reasonings in interviews do not describe an objective reality “out there” so much as they offer accounts of social situations, where respondents, together with the interviewer, create shared meaning around, justify, or explain a phenomenon (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018:48).



Combining interviews with observations in the digital environments where the participants are active has allowed me to get closer to their everyday contexts and what they actually are doing there. I have used observations to study the interactions within freelance communities, as well as between freelancers and their clients, followers, and other users. In addition, my observations have allowed me to get a better ethnographic sense of the platforms they are active on, both in terms of their technological affordances and the discourses which are reproduced through them.

In combining these methods, the dissertation shares an ambition with ethnographers to study people in their everyday contexts (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007:3). In my case, this means approaching what Hallett and Barber (2014:308) call the “natural habitat” of the participants as something multi-sited (cf. Marcus, 1995) and spread over many different digital platforms, as well as dispersed physical localities. I use digital observations partly as what Kozinets (2020:279) calls “immersive data”, which helps me make sense of the field as a cultural and social space. This includes generating a better understanding of the context in which my participants are active to help me formulate interview questions, and in turn, to recontextualize, complicate, or follow the stories told to me during interviews in relation to what I have observed (see also Eldén, 2020:120).

My understanding of ethnographic research is largely in line with O’Reilly’s (2012:13) summary of it as being

informed by a theory of practice that: understands social life as the outcome of the interaction of structure and agency through the practice of everyday life; that examines social life as it unfolds, including looking at how people feel, in the context of their communities, and with some analysis of wider structures, over time; that also examines, reflexively, one’s own role in the construction of social life as ethnography unfolds; and that determines the methods to draw on and how to apply them as part of the ongoing, reflexive practice of ethnography.

O’Reilly specifies several important ethnographic characteristics: a focus on *practices*; exploring the intersections of *structure and agency* in everyday life; an emphasis on *reflexivity* and the researcher’s part in shaping research; and viewing ethnography as an *ongoing process* that cannot be clearly defined in advance. All these principles have guided my research, but in particular, I would like to emphasize the focus on social practices and the importance of exploring the intersections of structure and agency. O’Reilly (2012:16) argues that by foregrounding the experiences, opinions, and feelings of respondents, ethnographers sometimes neglect the importance of the wider structural context that impacts and shapes the choices that individuals make. This is problematic if we, to use an oft-quoted passage, think that one of the premises for social science must be that individuals “make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered from the past” (Marx, 1852:np).

In line with O'Reilly, I thus argue that it is an essential task for the sociologist — ethnographer or not — to explore the interplay between individuals and their social milieu, whether we frame this interplay in terms of individual and society, agency and structure, subject and discourse, internalization and socialization, lifeworld and system, micro and macro, habitus and fields, biography and history, or something else. Focusing on practices thus entails examining what people are doing within certain structurally and culturally defined contexts. The sociologist should not only account for her observations and the stories and experiences of her respondents but also locate these against broader institutional contexts shaped by various social, cultural, economic, and political forces and structures.

Chapter 2 is partly a response to this challenge. Rather than viewing it as only a summation of previous research, I see it as the first step of the analytical process, sketching the contours of the structural, cultural, and economic context in which my participants operate. The theoretical framework has furthermore been created with the ambition to bridge the understanding of the accounts and practices of digital freelancers with a more structural understanding of their place within digital capitalism. On a less structural level, as I discuss in this chapter, digital observations further allow me to complement the accounts of interviewees with a more grounded ethnographic understanding of the everyday contexts in which they are active.

### **Constructing a field site and delimiting a case**

O'Reilly's (2012:13) observation that ethnographic research is an ongoing process that cannot be defined in advance describes well how I have worked with this dissertation. Field sites are not naturally existing "out there" but are rather constructed through the continuous choices, delimitations, and selections of the researcher. Not knowing exactly how the study will develop is thus part of the process. However, Markham (2017:2) makes the case that the difficulties of delimiting the field of study are amplified when social reality is increasingly mediated through digital technologies, a fact which she argues "complicates almost every aspect of research design" — from drawing boundaries around the context one studies, to defining what data is, to knowing how to collect material. This project has therefore required a methodological approach that can deal with an elusive research setting that "is dispersed across web platforms, is constantly in progress and changing, and implicates physical as well as digital localities" (Postill & Pink, 2012: 125).

Collecting data and defining the field site have, for me, not followed each other in a linear chronology. These have rather been intertwined and parallel processes that shape and influence each other (cf. Berg, 2015:88). How I have understood the field has influenced which data I collected, but the data has in turn also allowed me to recontextualize and redefine my understanding of the field and its limits. When I started the project, I had some vague interests (largely theoretical) in digital labor, gig work, subjectivity, precarization, and non-waged forms of work, but I did not

have a clearly defined case of who I should talk to, nor did I have any clearly formulated research questions. While methods chapters often portray the research process as relatively straightforward (which it might seem as in hindsight), I experienced it, at least initially, as rather messy.

Part of the initial challenge was to define for myself what case or what milieu I was going to study, particularly given that the practices I was interested in seemed to be dispersed over a variety of different platforms and spaces. What was the “case” I studied? Who should I talk to? What data should I use? What platforms should I look at? How wide or narrow should the selection criteria be for recruitment?

Eventually, I settled on “digital freelancers” as the umbrella term for the collective of workers I study, although this is not an emic term taken from the participants themselves. While some have identified as freelancers on their websites or during interviews, others have referred to themselves as self-employed, creative gig workers, or digital entrepreneurs. Some primarily identify with their main profession or expertise (say, as an illustrator or photographer) rather than their form of employment. Nevertheless, in order to conceptualize the practices of these workers, as well as study the formation of them as a particular subjective category of workers, I needed a term to refer to them in text and for myself when thinking about the case. It seemed preferable to talk about digital freelancers rather than gig workers, given that gig workers today are mainly equated with doing short tasks mediated through labor platforms. “Digital freelancers” strikes me as a broader concept, which can include work carried out under different contractual forms and that furthermore is not solely mediated through digital labor platforms.

I also adopted quite a broad definition of my case by deciding to study the practices of digital freelancers in the cultural industries as such, rather than any particular sub-sector, contractual form, or work mediated through a particular platform. This is because I was interested in exploring the heterogeneous practices by which cultural freelancers make a living from diverse sources of income, being the kind of multi-skilled creatives which McRobbie (2016a:27) argues are a new tendential model for cultural workers today. Focusing on the practices of these workers seemed to me to be a valuable addition to the academic literature, which often is carried out in the form of case studies of particular platforms or subsectors.

From the beginning of the project, I started to frequent various online platforms trying to get sense of how they worked and what kind of interactions took place there. I knew that much previous research on platform labor had been conducted as case studies or comparisons of particular platforms, but after having started to observe online interactions on a few different sites, such approaches seemed to reduce the complexity of the practices by which digital workers move through the platform economy and use different types of platforms for different purposes (cf. Madianou & Miller, 2013). Furthermore, digital freelancers seemed to attach very different meanings and importance to different platforms, which made it difficult to approach any one particular platform as a “privileged” site for them as a community

(cf. Caliendo & Gandini, 2016:4). These impressions were further strengthened when I started interviewing.

To capture the reality of freelance workers who are multi-skilled and who rely on multiple clients, platforms, and income streams to support themselves, I took inspiration from Hine's (2017:25) perspective of "tracing networks of connection through online and offline space" in order to generate a broader holistic understanding of social phenomenon which cannot be neatly confined to one location (say, a physical workplace) or to one specific platform. This approach entails "following" connections as they appear, by, for instance, clicking on links that actors post or by searching for information about platforms or services they mention in interviews or online discussions. In my view, this was an approach that seemed to better capture the way in which digital freelancers actually use digital platforms and support themselves.

### **Starting fieldwork and following connections**

I started my proper fieldwork after the study was granted permission by the Swedish Ethical review board in the spring of 2020, which coincided with the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>8</sup> Thereafter, I began to make observations of a variety of online settings, taking notes or screenshots of everything from the self-presentations and interactions of freelancers, to the interfaces of particular platforms. At this stage, I also started to contact some of the freelance workers I found in these settings, asking them if they would like to be interviewed. As I will come back to shortly, my digital observations have mostly been covert in the sense that I have not directly interacted with freelancers in these different spaces other than in private messages, email conversations, or interviews.

Carrying out digital observations seemed from the start an obvious choice for getting close to the platform practices and interactions of digital freelancers, but when the pandemic hit, it also became something of a necessity. The pandemic ruled out the possibility, which I then still entertained, of combining interviews and digital observations with participant observations at the participants' "workplaces" (homes, co-working spaces, rented offices, or similar). Nonetheless, compared to the many colleagues who had to cancel, postpone, or rethink their plans for fieldwork, my project could, with some slight adjustments and hiccups, continue almost as I had intended.

During this initial period of the pandemic, digital ethnography proved useful to gain insight into the tough situation of freelancers at the time that was characterized by feelings of stress, anxiety, and isolation. Many freelancers during this time lost commissions and income opportunities, and were confused about whether they would be eligible for any income subsidies from the state. These workers were very

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<sup>8</sup> Dnr. 2020-01002.

much left to their digital networks to make sense of and cope with this situation. Through my digital observations, I witnessed many interactions in the community first-hand. In this way, my data collection was strongly colored by the pandemic, at least initially. Covid-19 was unsurprisingly a reoccurring topic in the first batch of interviews, and it may have contributed to painting a grimmer picture of freelance life than I would have gotten if I had done my fieldwork in pre-pandemic times.

As I did not know at the beginning of my fieldwork which platforms would prove most useful for the project or for my population, I initially joined and registered on many different platforms, slowly but gradually expanding my understanding of the opportunities offered in the wider ecosystem of platform apparatuses. I searched on Google, which led me to the personal websites and blogs of freelance creators. Through these searches, I also found the websites of creative co-working spaces and interviews with creative freelancers in online magazines. Sometimes I contacted freelancers I found through these sites, in some cases, resulting in interviews or informal email conversations. I also joined creative labor platforms like Fiverr and Upwork, as well as some similar Swedish alternatives I found (however, these did not seem to have much activity).

Furthermore, I searched for and started following the accounts of freelancers, content creators, and influencers on Instagram and LinkedIn, which I continued to consume the content of throughout the research process. This has allowed me not only to observe the self-marketing practices or communication of digital freelancers themselves with their followers or other freelancers but also to get a sense of the wider discourses that permeate these settings.

I also joined 18 different Facebook groups for Swedish freelancers, content creators, digital workers, and cultural producers of different kinds, which I found by searching with different keywords through the platform. While I did not know it from the start, these Facebook groups have proved to be the most valuable setting for studying interactions within the freelance community, as well as for following links to other platforms, events, or websites I would not have found otherwise. For instance, I registered on Behance and Dribbble, two platforms for creative workers to show their professional portfolios, after I noticed that many freelancers included links to these sites in their profiles in the Facebook groups.

Rather than seeing all these different platforms and environments as disparate cases, I followed Burrell (2017:56) by thinking of them as “intersections” of freelancers, clients, consumers, objects, interactions, transactions, information, communication, and culture. I approached these intersections as starting points in loose rhizomatic networks that might lead in a number of directions. My approach for getting a better sense of the field has been to follow interactions and movements in this interconnected space, to create a more holistic understanding of freelance work in the platform economy.

The freelancer Facebook groups serve as an example of this strategy. These groups have not only been a setting for observing the many self-presentations and interactions between members of the freelance communities, but have also allowed

me to find freelancers to contact outside of the platforms. Many times, members in these groups would link to other websites and platforms, which I would then often follow. I followed links to the blogs, webpages, or Instagram accounts of freelancers themselves, where I have been able to study self-presentation practices, strategies for monetizing content, or their written accounts of what it is like to be a freelancer. Sometimes, freelancers would post links in the Facebook groups to news articles about freelancing trends or inspirational content from influencers and marketing gurus, which I also often collected as additional data or consumed to immerse myself and get a better sense of the discourses surrounding their practices. Other times, people have sent out invitations to digital or physical events, a couple of which I have attended. I followed all these different connections as they appeared, slowly but gradually gaining insight into the field under study.

Following connections has also worked the other way, by following leads from face-to-face interactions to digital spaces. During interviews, participants have, for instance, regularly talked about different platforms, creators, or online practices which I was not familiar with before. I have tried as much as possible to follow these leads. For instance, one illustrator I interviewed talked a lot about different platforms I was unaware of, that, for a fee, would print and sell his creations on t-shirts, coffee cups, and other commodities. I went online after the interview and observed these different platforms, trying to get a sense of their size, how they work, how they structure interactions, how much they take in fees, and so on. Other interviewees talked about different influencers or marketing gurus that they have taken inspiration from for how they market themselves online. I then searched for these creators online, finding their websites or accounts on Instagram and YouTube, where I read or watched some of their content in order to get a better sense of the discourses the participants position themselves against in their working practices. This has allowed me to immerse myself in the social world of the participants.

During this work, I have continuously taken screenshots and fieldnotes on observations and content of interest, collecting and eventually sorting these data in the NVivo software program and in paper notebooks. Chapter 5 is an attempt to map out the field I have studied and visualize it for the reader.

## Empirical material

In line with the methodological approach outlined above, several types of empirical material have been assembled for this project. Semi-structured interviews with digital freelancers are the main source of data under analysis. In addition to the interview transcripts, I have built a dataset of observational data from different platforms as well as from secondary source material, such as interviews with and articles about digital freelancers in news magazines, blogs, and personal websites.

## Interviews

I have conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with digital freelancers. The sample consists of 12 women and 11 men between 24 and 56 years old. The interviews range from 1 hour to 2.5 hours in length and are on average approximately 90 minutes. All interviewees have given their informed consent, and they were informed both before and during the interviews about their right to withdraw from the study and that no personal names or details that can be used to identify them will be disclosed in the study. I have also engaged in less formalized written conversations with some workers over email or private messages on platforms; these have not been analyzed and coded but have nevertheless contributed to my overall understanding of the field. For a table overview of the participants, see Appendix 1.

### *Sampling, recruitment, and participants*

When selecting persons to interview for the study, I used a sampling approach that takes inspiration from both theoretical sampling and, more practically, snowball sampling. Theoretical sampling is an approach central to grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2006; Charmaz, 2014), which sees the collection and analysis of data as simultaneous processes. Mason (2009:124) describes that theoretical sampling selects

groups or categories to study on the basis of their relevance to your research questions, your theoretical position and analytical framework, your analytical practice, and most importantly the argument or explanation that you are developing. Theoretical sampling is concerned with constructing a sample [...] which is meaningful theoretically and empirically, because it builds in certain characteristics or criteria which help to develop and test your theory or your argument.

Identifying relevant “characteristics and criteria” is not only carried out at the start of the project. Deciding what data to collect next arises through analytical engagement and is driven by considerations of how to develop and improve the theoretical understanding of a case (Conlon et al., 2020). Nonetheless, I formulated a couple of main selection criteria at the start of the recruitment process: That the participants 1) are freelancing cultural workers in Sweden, who 2) use digital platforms to find work and sustain their careers. These criteria include all dimensions I use to define and delimit digital freelancers as a population.

These rather broad and open selection criteria were formulated to maximize variation in the sample and the case. There are both pros and cons to such an approach. A more specific case study of, say, freelancing illustrators who find work through the platform Upwork, would have been able to produce more detailed and specific knowledge about the experiences of a particular segment of workers using that specific platform. However, given that much previous research on platform work is conducted in that way, I decided it would be more interesting with a broad sample, which can better capture the cross-platform and cross-sectoral practices of

making a living on cultural work. My early digital observations strengthened this conviction, as many freelancers I observed seemed to link between different platforms and market a broad set of skills and expertise in a variety of contexts.

When recruiting new informants, I have throughout the project strategically looked for respondents who can widen, nuance, and challenge the understanding of my case and research questions, as they were shaped by the ongoing analytical work. In ethnographic research, this is an iterative process that changes throughout the study, along with the research problems, theoretical suppositions, and the overall argument. As my understanding of the field has developed, I have picked further cases in order to increase “the chance of the odd case turning up” (Becker, 1998:86), which can help me further flesh out the categories under study or further the theoretical understanding of the case (Silverman, 2013b).

To find participants, I have mostly relied on my observations online to identify people who seem to fit the selection criteria, such as having an extensive presence on digital platforms. This approach has aligned well with the principle of following connections online. I have also used snowball sampling, as I have asked interviewees to recommend me new persons to contact that align with my general criteria. When contacting potential interviewees and informing them of the study, I have mentioned the selection criteria, such as that they should use different digital platforms to support themselves. Several of those I contacted declined to participate because they did not consider digital platforms as central to their business. Overall, about one third of the freelancers I contacted agreed to be interviewed.

I recruited participants through a number of different platforms, which was a strategy for increasing the variation in terms of which platforms the informants use. Quite a few were found as they posted in Facebook freelance groups that I was active in. At first, I contacted some of them through Facebook Messenger, but I later started using my work email instead, as this made it easier for them to confirm by identity. A few were found either through the labor platforms Upwork and Fiverr, or through the portfolio platform Behance. On these sites, I used the search filters specifically to find users active in Sweden. One of the first interviewees I talked to mentioned the freelancer lists Byrålistan.se and Illustratörcentrum.se, which I then used to find a few more interviewees. Some were found through Instagram and LinkedIn, or Google searches which led me to their websites or blogs. Finally, a few were recruited through snowballing or personal recommendations.

Contacting people directly has allowed me to steer the sampling based on theoretical ideas or based on information from previous interviews, in order to continuously broaden the sample and advance the theoretical understanding and argument (Mason, 2009). This has resulted in a quite heterogenous sample. Informants are active in different creative professions. They display different ways of making an income and have experiences from a range of different platforms. The sample is also varied in terms of age and gender. I have not directly looked for participants with different class or educational backgrounds, although the final sample displays some variation in these dimensions too. Furthermore, I looked for



participants professionally active in Sweden, regardless of their national background; however, snowball sampling resulted in one interview with a person currently living in another Nordic country, which I have chosen to include anyway to the extent that her experiences reflect general experiences of freelancing in the Nordic context. The resulting sample mostly, though not exclusively, consists of people who have grown up in Sweden.

All the participants are professionally active within cultural sectors driven by economic, rather than artistic, logics. This distinction is however not clear cut: Several combine commercial commissions with artistic production or aspirations on the side, and many draw on artistic skills learned from artistic practice when doing commercial commissions (cf. Gerber, 2017:46). None of them, however, primarily identify as artists. I have delimited cultural and communicative work to professions engaged in “symbolic production” (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). The sampled individuals are active in areas such as illustration, graphic design, photography, branding, web design, writing, blogging, or digital content creation. Often, this production is close to advertising. Many in the sample combine several of these expressions and skills, pointing to a large degree of heterogeneity in their professional experiences.

All participants have identified as freelancers, gig workers, or solo self-employed, but there is much variation in how they support themselves. Some work exclusively with freelance commissions. Others had project- or part-time employment in addition to their own commissions, which helped them make a living. Some have freelanced for 25 years, while others had only recently started out. Some have had big troubles finding enough commissions to support themselves financially, while others have been quite successful. Some do a lot of local commissions and rely on geographical networks, while others work entirely through digital platforms. Several participants worked extra jobs outside their creative expertise, on the side, to support themselves. A few combined occasional freelance commissions with art grants or benefits.

As seen in chapter 2, we know that low pay, often below the minimum set by collective agreements for employees, characterize cultural, artistic, and journalistic freelance work in Sweden (Flisbäck, 2011; Werne, 2015; Lindström, 2016; Bucht, 2022; Nesser, 2024).<sup>9</sup> This picture aligns with my sample. While I did not directly ask the participants to specify their annual earnings, I talked extensively with many interviewees about their financial situation. Most (though not all) expressed that they were or had been struggling financially, and all reported highly fluctuating

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<sup>9</sup> Statistics from the Swedish union DIK (2024) and from Statistics Sweden (SCB, 2024) can illustrate the medium salaries for employees within some of the professions I study. These numbers show that, in 2023, the median monthly salary for graphic designers is 39 000 kronor, 40 300 kronor for copywriters, 40 125 kronor for communicators, and 36 600 kronor for photographers, with rather large differences between the 10th and 90th percentile. However, freelancers generally earn less than that (Bucht, 2022; Nesser, 2024). Freelance fees are negotiated individually rather than through collective agreements, and freelancers often have periods without any commissioned work, which means that they may not work full time. I discuss these questions more in chapter 6.

levels of income, which made it difficult for them to specify how much they generally earned monthly, yearly, or per commission. Many interviewees expressed fears and stress over prolonged periods of unemployment, difficulties in supporting themselves and their families, future poverty, or not being able to take vacation, sick days, or put away money for their pension. Those that had most difficulties in finding work also expressed difficulties in accessing unemployment benefits.

One participant was a full-time employee at the time of the interview with his own company currently dormant, and a couple had their companies dormant at the time of the interview in order to access unemployment benefits. I see this variation as reflective of a labor market where participants routinely transition between different jobs, income sources, and periods of employment and unemployment (Ilsøe et al., 2021). My sample reflects this heterogeneous reality, but has also enabled me to find patterns and similarities within it.

With such a broad sample, the intention has however obviously never been to draw grand generalizations for the population as a whole, but to increase the understanding of the theoretical categories that I study (Conlon et al., 2020). Nonetheless, I also do not think my study only speaks for the sampled individuals. Despite the variation in the sample, I did already start to notice repeated patterns and themes in the narratives and experiences of the interviewees after around 15 interviews. After I conducted all the interviews, along with all the discussions I had observed in my digital observations, there was certainly a kind of theoretical saturation in terms of the wider arguments I wanted to make (Mason, 2009:136). While there were many avenues that remained that I could have further explored by doing more interviews, the data I already had was so rich and varied, while still pointing to general tendencies and experiences, that it did not seem necessary.

### *Interviewing during a pandemic*

Most of the interviews were conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic in Sweden, between spring 2020 and autumn 2021. Apart from two interviews carried out face-to-face when the infection rates were low (one at the respondent's office and one at a café) and three telephone interviews, all the interviews were conducted over video conferencing services like Zoom, Skype, Whereby, and Google Meet. Four additional interviews were carried out in 2023: one at a café, one over the telephone, and two over Zoom. These four interviews were mainly carried out to obtain more information about a few topics that were briefly touched upon in the first round of interviews, but which, during the analysis, I found that I needed more extensive reflections on.

While, according to conventional wisdom, it may have been preferable to carry out more interviews in person, the video call interviews (and, to a lesser extent, the phone interviews) have allowed me to generate rich data that makes me hesitant to refer to them as second-rate substitutes for the "real thing" (cf. Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). It is my impression that many interviewees found it not only safe (in regard

to the pandemic) but also convenient to speak this way, instead of squeezing in face-to-face meetings in their oft-hectic schedules. Due to the pandemic, most of the respondents (and I too) had grown accustomed to these technologies.

Interviewing “at a distance” allowed me to interview respondents who lived in locations throughout Sweden, which fits the geographically dispersed practices I am studying. While I let the interviewees decide how to conduct the interview, I have, in the first instance, suggested video conferencing tools like Zoom rather than telephone. Video conferencing has not only allowed me to observe the facial expressions and body language of the person I talk with but also get a sense of their working space, whether they work from home or from an office. Their working spaces often became a point of conversation. Some interviewees would walk me through their office with their webcam in hand, showing me where they spend their days. During some video interviews, the “share screen” function of Zoom was used if the respondent wanted to show me something specific on their computer screen related to their work process (such as a specific platform or work tool they used), something from their website, or simply digital art or images that they found inspirational. Such functions have helped me gain a richer understanding than what would have been possible using a telephone.

A couple of the interviewees expressed that it would be more convenient for them to do the interview over telephone, or that they were tired of sitting in front of a computer screen and participating in Zoom meetings all day and that they wanted to do the interview over telephone so they could talk while taking a walk outside. I have accepted phone interviews in these cases.

All the interviews were semi-structured and I utilized an interview guide centered around a number of themes, going from the general (“Can you tell me a bit about yourself?” “How do you usually describe what your work is?”) to the specific (“How do you use [this platform] in your work?”, “How do you set a price on this sort of labor?”). When preparing the interview guide, I tried to translate theoretical questions and assumptions into everyday language (Kvale, 2007:58). Nonetheless, certain questions had to be reformulated or scrapped between interviews, when I realized that they did not really work in an interview setting.

To get informative responses, the interview guide was tailored beforehand to the interviewee based on, for instance, information from their website or social media (Weiss, 1994). In some cases, this background information was translated into explicit interview questions (e.g., “On your website, you describe yourself as a whole advertising agency in one person. How did you come up with that description?” or “I read one of your blog posts where you discussed your reluctance to use Instagram. Could you elaborate on that?”). This sort of preparation also made me more comfortable with stepping outside of the strict boundaries of the interview guide (cf. Ryen, 2004:55). For an example of the interview guide, see Appendix 2.

In general, I did not follow the order of the questions and themes in the interview guide, and during some interviews, I did not use the interview guide at all. Rather, I strived for conversational and naturalistic interviews (Ryen, 2004; Brinkmann,

2023). I have attempted to listen attentively to the interviewees and ask for clarifications or elaborations when I saw fit. In addition, I tried to ask short and specific open-ended questions, which would prompt the interviewee to give a detailed response rather than answering a simple “yes” or “no”. Furthermore, I have favored “how” questions over “why” questions to avoid putting the interviewees in a position where they feel that they have to rationalize their behavior or defend their own (often conflicted or half-articulated) motives (Becker, 1998:58; Fangen, 2005:196). In an interview situation, participants might hide, idealize, exaggerate, or tone down information depending on how they perceive the interview situation; for example, they might speak their mind freely, or say what they think the interviewer wants them to say (Silverman, 2017). “How” questions do not evoke the same sense that there is a “right” answer, and might thus make the interviewees more comfortable to speak their mind rather than trying to adapt the answers to their perception of the researcher’s agenda.

Describing the interviews as conversational is not to equate them with everyday conversations (Brinkmann, 2023). Interviews have a different dynamic and are centered around an asymmetrical power relation where the respondents typically provide information while the interviewer steers the discussion. Interviews are, typically, conducted for instrumental purposes, in that interviewees provide information for the researcher’s aims. The researcher also generally has monopoly on the interpretation and representation of the data (see also Kvale, 2006:483pp).

The dynamic of interviews makes it important — yet challenging — to establish a trusting relationship and to make the interviewee feel comfortable. I found this to be more difficult during the digital interviews than in the few in-person interviews. Meeting face-to-face provided opportunities for small talk and to get to know each other through casual conversation about their work space or about their favorite café or pastries. These informal introductions proved a bit more difficult to replicate during the digital interviews.

On the other hand, conducting digital interviews in the quiet of the home or office usually resulted in clear and easily transcribable sound recordings, compared to the boisterous and at times indistinct recordings from cafés. One exception was one Zoom interview where the respondent had a problem with his microphone. This made it difficult to hear what was being said and to ask good follow-up questions, resulting in a more or less inaudible recording that was painstaking and time-consuming to transcribe. When choosing how to conduct an interview, it is thus important to take into consideration what equipment the respondents may need, as not everyone has access to expensive microphones and web cameras.

Furthermore, there were some occasional minor technological hiccups with the video streaming for both me and interviewees, with the image freezing or cameras not working. Given that I, during the pandemic, carried out all Zoom interviews from my apartment where I knew the wi-fi connection was somewhat unreliable, I always had a certain nervousness before starting about whether the interview would work or not. Usually, it worked without any problems.

Turn-taking worked slightly different during the video interviews than the face-to-face interviews. During face-to-face interviews, we occasionally spoke at the same time or interrupted each other with insertions or clarifications. When conducting digital interviews, both parties were generally more inclined to wait and to let the other finish their sentence or line of thought before interrupting, as it otherwise becomes difficult to hear what the other is saying. I think this allowed the respondents to take the time to speak their minds. While this sometimes made it more difficult to interrupt and steer the conversation as the interviewer, it resulted in rich and thoughtful responses. The interviews are, however, characterized by very different social dynamics; In some, I talk almost as much as the interviewee, asking many questions and prompts and getting only fairly short answers in return. In other interviews, I talk very little, only inserting small prompts or follow-up questions to steer the interviewee in the right direction.

Most participants have been articulate and good at expressing themselves and their thoughts, even in quite academic or theoretical matters. Perhaps this is the expression of a common self-disciplinary mode among cultural workers today, “where subjects are increasingly called upon to inspect themselves and their practices, in the absence of structures of social support” (McRobbie, 2016a:23), and where self-reflexivity itself is a valuable skill to display and market (Wee & Brooks, 2010). Either way, this has resulted in rich interview data, which I quote extensively in the analytical chapters. Their self-reflexivity has however sometimes made analysis a bit tricky, as, in some cases, it has been difficult to know whether what the interviewees say is reflective of their own experiences of, say, insecure employment, or whether it reflects a kind of meta-commentary or self-positioning against wider social debates on precarization.

### *Informed consent and pseudonymization*

When I first contacted the interviewees, usually by email, I sent them information about the study. In the correspondence, I wrote why I contacted them, how I found their profile, and that I wanted to interview them for my dissertation project. I provided quite general descriptions of the study and explained that I wanted to talk to them about their working experiences and ask questions such as why they are freelancing, what they like and find challenging about their work, how they use different digital platforms, and how their work affects their everyday life. I also wrote that they would be able to raise issues which they themselves find important in relation to their work. Furthermore, I provided information about their participation being completely voluntary, that they at any time could end their participation, and that I would not refer to their real names or use any personal information that could identify them in the thesis. I repeated this information at the start of every interview.

All participants have been granted pseudonyms to protect their identities. This is generally an unproblematic step in sociological studies, but it has introduced some dilemmas in my research. Cultural workers who are asked to participate in an

academic study might seek exposure in order to cultivate their personal brands. The idea of pseudonymization “protecting them” might thus seem absurd, as they may need visibility to sustain their careers. This is at odds with the traditions of the social scientist, for whom the ideals of anonymity and confidentiality are so strongly routinized (see Savage & Burrows, 2009). Making the principles of pseudonymization looser would, in some cases, not only make recruitment easier but could also be a way to “give something back” to the participants. At the same time, this risks creating a “commercial sociology” that lends the academic platform to individual self-promotion (McRobbie, 2016b:939p). Furthermore, not changing the names of participants would make it more difficult to take their responses at face value, given that these responses might be formulated with an imagined public audience in mind.

The question of pseudonymization was not an issue for most who agreed to participate. A couple participants stated that they would not mind appearing with their own name, and some chuckled a bit at the formality when I introduced the study and presented their rights as participants. However, none had any major objections to pseudonymization. In fact, several respondents expressed that they were glad they would be anonymized, so they could talk and express themselves freely about their sector without future repercussions. In some interviews, it even became a recurring joke, as when photographer Susanne exclaimed, “Oh God, what am I saying! I *really* hope you don’t put my name in your study!”. If anything, I think this illustrates the importance of anonymization. Offering a space where the interviewees can talk freely about their working experiences, without thinking about the repercussions on their career, brand, or future employment prospects, might in itself be an antidote to the ever-pressing demands of the attention economy.

To not disclose the identities of the participants, I sometimes change information or personal details that are not vital for the analysis. I generally do not disclose where participants are from if they are not from the big Swedish cities. Furthermore, I sometimes do not specify what specific niche participants have for their brands or creative output, if it is particular and easily identifiable. I also avoid linking interviewees directly to particular online content, as this could be a way of identification.

## **Digital observations and secondary material**

In addition to the interview transcripts, I have also built a data set of observational data from different platforms. I have furthermore collected secondary source material, such as interviews with and articles about digital freelancers in news magazines, blogs, and personal websites. Observational data has been used in different ways. It has allowed me to immerse myself in the social and cultural context of the participants in order to get a better understanding of how they use different platforms in an interconnected manner. The logic of *following connections* discussed earlier has been useful here. Some of this data is analyzed in the analytical

chapters next to the interview data, allowing for a form of triangulation, or to contextualize interview narratives against online practices or discourses. All in all, I think this enables a more detailed and complex understanding of my case than what had been possible to achieve through only interviews.

In total, I have saved on my computer and smartphone more than 900 screenshots from different online interactions, texts, posts, or platform interfaces. Some posts with many comments on for instance Facebook or Instagram have required several screenshots to capture all the comments of interest. I also have two notebooks with handwritten notes related to digital observations, and a physical folder with printed or cut-out articles from newspapers, blogs, and magazines.

My observations on different platforms have varied in their scope and level of attentiveness, and it is difficult to quantify how much time I have spent in different environments. The observations on, for instance, labor platforms (Upwork, Fiverr) and portfolio platforms (Behance, Dribbble) have generally been carried out in quite focused sittings. In contrast, I have since early 2020 up until 2024 on a semi-daily basis consumed content from the Facebook groups and followed Instagram accounts, as I receive posts from them in my social media feeds, but my engagement has often been quite casual. Sometimes, I have read the posts or comments more carefully and followed links to other websites or content. If I found them interesting for the project, I might take screenshots, but often I have glanced through the posts and then went on with my life. However, even in the latter cases, the observations have contributed to my general understanding of the field and interactions in it.

Tying my online observations back to the concept of the “social factory” discussed in chapter 3, it is thus fair to say that the ethnographic process has erased clear boundaries between work and free time also for me. I have consumed and thought about material “from the field” not only during office hours but also while on the train or on the sofa at night, as posts interesting for my project have found their way into my “private” social media accounts. This has, in a way, made me part of the field, which I still have not really left at the time of writing this, in terms of unfollowing accounts or leaving Facebook groups and email lists.

My observations could be described as covert, as I have generally not directly engaged with different communities or users expect when asking for interviews. In some cases, such interactions have however resulted in longer conversations over chat or email. Some freelancers who for different reasons declined interview participation wrote some reflections back to me based on my stated research topic. On a few occasions, this has resulted in some back-and-forth exchanges. Such exchanges have further enhanced my understanding of the field, even though I do not analyze them as data in the analytical chapters.

In contrast to interview data that is produced in the interaction between researcher and participant, the internet is an infinite well of data which, in a sense, is produced independently of the researcher’s presence. Silverman (2013a) has advocated for using such what he calls “naturally occurring data”, which he argues give more direct access to what people actually are *doing* than “manufactured data” produced

through, for instance, interviews, which are initiated and steered by the researcher. I agree that this is useful for coming closer to the actual practices of people than what is possible through interviews, where these practices are only accounted for. Talking with an interviewee about, say, unpaid commissions is one thing, but observing a community of freelancers talk about it independently of my presence is another, which shows that these debates really are ongoing “out there” and that it is not a topic imposed by my own theoretical suppositions.

While much internet data is naturally *occurring*, in the sense that it is produced independently of the researcher, data in itself is never “natural” or “untouched by the researcher’s hands” (Silverman, 2013a:49). Just as field sites do not exist independently of the researcher’s conceptualizations of them, empirical data is not so much “found” as it is constructed. This point is also emphasized by Alvesson and Kärreman (2012:48), who problematize the view that empirical data give us direct access to an objective social reality. They point out that data always is constructed through the choices, selections, and interpretations of the researcher, who group certain data traces together and ascribe coherence to them rather than others. These choices are not neutral. They are based on a mix of intuition, theoretical presuppositions, personal interests, political engagements, the social background of the researcher, the research environment in which the study is conducted, and so on (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2012:18). There is no “pure” data, as it can only be seen through a certain interpreting frame.

The screenshots were initially sorted in different folders on the computer named after the platforms where they were taken. These screenshots and other collected digital material can roughly be categorized in four main types of activities: 1) discussions in freelance communities, 2) self-presentations of freelancers, 3) platform interfaces and affordances, and 4) articles and content about digital freelancing. These categories are not completely distinct from each other analytically but serve to illustrate to the reader what sort of data I have collected.

*Discussions* in freelance communities include data from conversations in Facebook groups and comments on Instagram or LinkedIn posts. This category also includes discussions in forums, including those of labor platforms like Upwork and Fiverr. These interactions deal with many different topics, from strategies for pricing or self-marketing, to recommendations of particular platforms or ways of finding clients, to platform-specific comments about algorithms or rating systems, to affective reactions on the posts of others.

The data on *self-presentations* include screenshots of profiles and posts on, for instance, Instagram, Fiverr, Upwork, Behance, or personal websites. It also includes self-promoting posts in Facebook groups. This data includes both images and texts that illustrate how freelancers present and brand themselves to clients and the freelance community at large.

The screenshots of *platform interfaces and affordances* highlight structural features of the platform apparatuses I have observed. Sometimes they overlap with self-presentations. This data includes how, for instance, a labor platform like



Upwork promotes certain content or freelancers, how their rating system looks, or what type of information they allow freelancers to post about themselves on their profiles. It can also include, for instance, how the website of a freelancer, through headings, links, or icons, connects the website with other platforms.

*Articles and content about digital freelancing* includes data which (re)produces certain cultural and discursive understandings of digital freelancing practices and careers. This includes blog posts from freelancers themselves, inspirational articles, content by influencers or marketing gurus, articles or informative content by various platforms, and interviews with freelancers published by online magazines. With longer written articles or blog posts, I would usually print these out and place them in a physical folder instead of saving them as screenshots.

### *Ethics online: Informed consent, anonymization, and de-traceability*

Digital ethnography poses different ethical questions than interviews. As with the interview data, my chief ethical concern with the digital ethnography has been to not cause any harm or discomfort to anyone through the data I collect or how I choose to (re)present this data in the study. For this reason, I have taken several steps to anonymize any data that could be traced back to specific individuals.

Similar to many other researchers who use digital data, I have wrestled a bit with the questions of informed consent and the privacy of online users. When interviewing, questions of informed consent are relatively straightforward: You present information about the study and possible risks associated with it to potential participants, and they choose if they want to take part or not. This is more difficult in digital ethnography, where you observe settings with hundreds or thousands of users. What does informed consent mean in these contexts? When is it needed, and from whom?

While various ethical guidelines for conducting digital social research have slowly developed, these are not static, and there is still a large degree of flexibility involved when different researchers interpret them for specific research contexts. This is necessary, because the questions that digital researchers encounter are seldom straightforward. In general, the emerging consensus seems to be that researchers should try as much as possible to get informed consent from producers of such data, particularly when it is created within “private” environments (franzke et al., 2019; NESH, 2019). However, who to ask for permission remains an ambiguous question in online settings with several hundreds or thousands of users.

One key question in the debates about when informed consent is required for digital data collection involves what constitutes public or private research settings. Public and private is not a dichotomous distinction, I would argue, but rather exists on a continuous scale. Markham and Baym (2009:75), for instance, talk about public, semi-public, semi-private, and private environments. In their view, public environments are open for everyone without registration, such as web pages or public blogs. Semi-public environments are sites like social media networks or forums which, in principle, are open to everyone but might need registration or

membership. Semi-private environments are only open to some people and require membership, which is often dependent on formal requirements, such as being employed by or part of a specific organization (such as company intranets). Private online environments are hidden to most users and might require a personal invite or being granted personal access by the creator.

However, the distinction between public–private should not be reified as the sole defining criteria for whether it is okay to collect and analyze certain online data. As Cotter (2019:901) notes, “In online environments, concerns for public/private content, perceived privacy, sensitivity of material, and vulnerability of users should collectively and contextually inform ethical decision-making”. This falls in line with, for instance, the guidelines of Norwegian NESH (National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities),<sup>10</sup> which states that it is important

to distinguish between *accessibility in the public sphere* and the *sensitivity of the information*. The statement might have been made in public or in private, and the content can be of a personal or general nature. There is thus a continuum that ranges from particularly sensitive information revealed in closed online forums to general information published in a public arena targeting a broad audience. In terms of research ethics, the grey zone often involves sensitive information and statements published in open Internet forums where it may be less obvious whether this is a public arena or not (NESH, 2019:9p).

They go on to write that an important criterion is the “reasonable expectation of publicity” (NESH, 2019:10), that is, whether informants likely *perceive* that their information and communication is public. As an example, they note that closed Facebook groups with several thousands of members, which technically are “private” in the sense that they require membership, may still be perceived as public. Similarly, we can imagine that a blog which technically is public to everyone but which seems to be written for an imagined audience of close friends or family might not be perceived as public by the creator and therefore should not be researched without informed consent. However, as Markham and Baym (2009:83) point out, the researcher’s perception of whether particular users might think their content is public or private does not necessarily align with what the users themselves think.

Markham and Baym (2009:83) go on by arguing that perhaps researchers should pay more attention to whether their research in any way might harm, humiliate, or offend participants, and less on if certain environments are considered public or not in current ethical guidelines. This is also a principle I tried to follow when deciding which data to collect. I have strived to not collect any data needlessly that could be interpreted as sensitive if it is not important for the arguments I try to make in the thesis. I have also de-personalized all data as to not offend or infringe on the perceived privacy of particular individuals. All data that is analyzed is

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<sup>10</sup> From what I have found, there exists no comparable Swedish ethical guidelines for digital research.

pseudonymized, and I have tried, as much as possible, to not disclose any information that would make it traceable in order to protect the privacy of participants. Some of the quotes will have been translated, altered, or paraphrased to make it more difficult to track them to their source. When screenshots are presented as data (for instance, because I want to highlight a certain feature in the interface of a platform or illustrate a conversation with several users), I have blurred names, profile pictures, and other details that could be used to identify the poster. Otherwise, I have opted for translating screenshots into quotes and fieldnotes in the analytical chapters, so as to not give away too much traceable information.

Most online data I have collected can be said to be either public or semi-public, according to Markham and Baym's (2009:75) categories. My observations of freelancers' websites, blog texts, or inspirational content for freelancers on websites are arguably collected from public environments and are typically directed to a general audience. I generally do not refer to the names of the websites of these creators unless they are famous and well-known. Platforms like Behance and Dribbble (which many visual creators use as portfolios) are, to a large extent, open without registration and do not contain any sensitive information. The social media accounts of freelancers (on, for instance, Instagram or LinkedIn) are typically either public or semi-public, sometimes requiring that one follow them for access. I have also tried to discern whether these accounts are addressed to a general audience or are more personal and directed to friends and families. If, for instance, an Instagram account only is open for followers, I have not used it as data.

Labor platforms like Upwork and Fiverr are arguably also semi-public and available through registration, but a bit more ambivalent in the sense that I have had to create a "client account" to access freelancer profiles. I used my work email so as to not deceive anyone with my identity. In line with for instance Gegenhuber et al. (2021:1481), who have also researched similar platforms by employing similar tactics, I think this is justifiable, given that I have been studying very general data on the platform level, which is visible to all registered users. I have neither collected any data about specific individuals, nor proprietary data about the platforms. However, I do, for instance, use data from freelancer profiles, but only to illustrate how these platforms structure interactions and self-presentations through interfaces and ratings systems. As these platforms are powerful actors in today's platform economy, I think it is justifiable to research these environments in the ways that are available, especially when using non-sensitive data that is available to supposedly several millions of registered platform users.

I have also made observations in 18 different Facebook groups for freelancers and digital creators. Some groups were open, but most were closed and required that I apply for membership. I would classify these groups as semi-public, as they are findable through searches, and in principle, are open for anyone who wants to join. In some cases, I have had to fill out a form when joining asking my reasons for joining, where I have then written that I am a researcher examining digital freelance practices and communities. I have seen this as a way of informing the moderators

about my intentions. Most of these groups have several thousands of members, some close to 15 000. Moreover, they often contain self-promotive content and are addressed to quite a wide public, which makes it likely that the posters are aware that their content might be read by a variety of different people. Furthermore, these groups seldom contain any sensitive or personal information that I have reason to expect would offend anyone to paraphrase in a non-identifiable way.

I have not directly asked any particular producers of content for their consent in the Facebook groups, as this would prove unwieldy and difficult in settings containing so many users and commentators. I mention none of the Facebook groups by name to make traceability more difficult. In the analytical chapters, I furthermore paraphrase exchanges in these environments as fieldnotes or slightly rewrite quotes rather than show screenshots, in order to make it difficult to trace quotes back to any particular user. For my argument, what is most important with this data is not any particular individuals or information about them but rather the more general sociological practices, activities, or discourses that they illustrate and exemplify.

## The analytical process

The interviews were recorded on a dictaphone and transcribed in the NVivo Software Package, usually in close connection to the date of the interview when I still had them fresh in my mind. Before transcribing, I often started by writing down my thoughts and reflections around the interview, for example, how it went, and whether there were any particular circumstances around the interview worth remembering. The interviews were then typically transcribed verbatim to include the pauses, repetitions, and markers of hesitation (both mine and the interviewees) that characterize so many social interactions in their awkward glory. When I re-listened to the recordings and proofread the transcripts, I occasionally “tidied up” the text to make it more readable. This involved removing superfluous repeated words which muddled the transcripts, and in rarer cases, slightly restructuring the words in a sentence. Some of the messiness and incoherence of natural conversation (Fangen, 2005:197) has thus been removed when it is not important for the meaning.

All the interviews were conducted in Swedish, and the quotes used in the dissertation are my own translations into English. I have tried to keep the translations as close to the original transcripts as possible while still retaining the meaning of what was said, which has not always been easy. Sometimes when I am uncertain of how to best translate a certain word, I retain the Swedish word in brackets next to my English translation. Much of the collected online material has been in Swedish too. When translating these quotes or texts, I have sometimes made deliberate changes (without losing the original meaning) in order to make them less searchable online. Presenting more digital data as screenshots rather than written

text or retellings could arguably enhance the claims for reliability but would also, in many cases, disclose the settings I have studied or the identities of those I quote.

In the transcriptions, I use parentheses to indicate gestures, sounds, laughs, sighs, or body language. In addition, I use brackets to indicate my own analytical comments, clarifications, or abbreviations. Pauses are noted with ellipses, words that are heavily emphasized in speech are put in *italics*, and interruptions are noted with a long dash, as in this (fictitious) example:

Interviewer: So ... you mean that you—

Interviewee: No, no, that's *not* what I mean (sighs heavily).

As anyone who has ever transcribed an interview knows, it is a time-consuming and occasionally tiresome process. In conversations with colleagues when either one has been in “transcribing mode”, it has been common with complaints that it would be nice to outsource it to an AI service rather than doing it ourselves. At the same time, transcribing is not mindless. For me, it has often been the first step in analyzing my interviews and getting close to the data. When listening to the recordings and thinking about what was said, many thoughts have emerged around interesting themes or patterns in the data. In a way, this was the start of a mental sorting. I often had to pause transcription and jot down thoughts around interesting themes or phrases.

The transcriptions were then coded and thematized in NVivo. I kept the transcripts together with the audio recordings so that I can go back and re-listen to parts of them if I, for instance, needed to hear how certain phrases were pronounced or intoned. The online data was first sorted in folders on an external hard drive based on the platforms where it was collected and then put into and coded in NVivo as well. At first, I had separate NVivo projects for my interviews and the digital material, but eventually I merged them to make the analysis easier and to have most material (excluding printed material and such) in the same analytical space. While this, to an extent, made it easier to place and analyze different sorts of data in relation to each other, it has also occasionally resulted in a feeling of being overwhelmed by the data and of not knowing how to do it all justice in written text.

My initial coding was open, extensive, and quite descriptive. Sometimes, I coded particular lines, other times specific words, and in some cases, longer paragraphs. Screenshots were often coded with several different codes, highlighting both specific details and more general themes in both image and text. Descriptive codes would include things like “difficult to plan ahead”, “stress”, “uneven workload”, or “deadlines”. During the second phase of coding, the number of codes was condensed, and I turned particular codes into sub-codes under larger overarching themes. The aforementioned codes were, for instance, sorted under “working conditions”.

When coding the material, I was inspired by Gubrium and Holstein's (1997:118) notion of analytical bracketing (see also Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018:55p). This involves looking at both the *whats* (content) and *hows* (form) of the empirical material and going back and forth between these dimensions. The *whats* refer to the substantive dimensions of data, such as, according to digital freelancers' accounts, what characterizes their working conditions. The descriptive codes above are examples of this. The *hows*, in contrast, refers to the constitutive dimensions of data: how participants talk about their experiences, or how they might explain, legitimize, ascribe meaning to, or critique their working conditions. Analytical bracketing does not "take substantive conditions for granted, as given truths of the settings under consideration" (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997:121), but pay attention to how actors construct certain versions of social reality through their interactions.

Chapter 6 on unpaid and underpaid labor can serve as an example. The chapter first sets out to substantively describe and analyze different forms of unpaid work, which together can help problematize the common equation of "work" with "paid employment". This means seriously approaching unpaid work as a phenomenon that really exists, which we can get a better understanding of by talking with and observing those affected by it, even though their accounts never fully mirror an objective reality "out there". In addition, the chapter examines how digital freelancers talk about, justify, and ascribe meaning to uncompensated work. When coding the material, this involved looking at the words or phrases they used to make sense of unpaid work, such "I do it now so I can get better paid jobs in the future", "It's almost my hobby, so it's not a big problem", or "If you're new, you must start somewhere" (cf. Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018:79). Such *how* codes enable a deeper understanding of how the phenomenon of unpaid work is socially constructed and ascribed meaning by actors through their verbal accounts.

As I spent time with the material and re-read my transcripts, I refined my theoretical ideas. This allowed me to view the material in a new light and to generate new codes or themes of a more theoretical or analytical nature, which also enabled the refinement of my theoretical ideas. Codes and themes have thus constantly been added or revised during the process. As I started writing my analytical chapters and strengthened my arguments, I also developed themes which more directly corresponded to these chapters. "Patchworking", "self-branding", "unpaid labor", and "self-precarization", for instance, emerged as analytical themes containing both descriptive and theoretical sub-codes of both *whats* and *hows*.

My way of relating to and analyzing the material could be described as abductive (see Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). The abductive pendulum moves from initial ideas, questions, hypotheses, or concepts derived from theories, previous research, or personal experiences, to empirical data against which these ideas or questions are tested, to new conceptualizations and reformulations of theories or questions growing out of this analytical process. As I understand it, this involves going back and forth between developing my empirical and theoretical arguments without giving primacy to one or the other. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007:159) describe

this as an “iterative process in which ideas are used to make sense of data, and data are used to change our ideas”.

While certain theoretical interests and traditions have guided me and my interests right from the start — for instance, a Foucauldian understanding of subjectivity — the theoretical framework gradually took shape and step by step became more refined as my understanding of the empirical material deepened. Reading and thinking about the data and the patterns in it has required me to also develop the theoretical understanding of its different elements, to re-conceptualize parts of the theory or combine it with other traditions, and to add to it my own analytical and theoretical categories. This involved not only a deductive testing of theory or an inductive formulation of new concepts but also simultaneously going back and forth between these modes.

As an example of this, in chapter 8, I develop the concept self-precarization through empirical work. This concept is not my own originally and it comes from a certain theoretical tradition (as described in chapter 3), but I had no idea at the start that this was what I wanted to study. Rather, when I worked with my empirical material, I was surprised by the extent to which insecurities and uncertainties — while they often were lamented — were also often described in a positive light and as something opted-in for voluntarily. When I come into contact with the self-precarization concept, it seemed to capture essential elements of this tension I had witnessed in my data. Hence, I saw a potential to nuance and develop it further through the patterns I observed. This in turn pushed me to return to the material in the light of this concept and to explore how they fitted or clashed with each other, in order both to advance the understanding of what was happened in the material and to further develop the theoretical concept.

Examining *how* participants account for situations and create meaning around themselves and their social situation has often involved looking at the *comparisons* they make between themselves and others. In their speech, they often draw on discursive resources and cultural vocabularies to make distinctions that give meaning to their accounts and that allow them to form their own coherent subjectivities. Given that I view the digital freelancer as a hybrid figure (cf. Murgia & Pulignano, 2021; Repenning & Oechslen, 2023) that may traverse the positions of digital entrepreneur, cultural worker, self-employed, platform worker, and content creator, without fully fitting within any of them, these comparisons range widely.

To exemplify, some participants compare their position as self-employed to what they perceive as boring hierarchical nine-to-five work. Others make comparisons between freelance work today and freelance work 20 years ago. Some make comparisons between themselves as cultural workers and others who they perceive have less creative, passionate, and self-expressive jobs. Others make comparisons between themselves as artistic subjects and more commercial cultural producers or content creators. Some draw comparisons between cultural work before and after

platforms, or between different forms of platform workers. Others compare themselves as freelancers in Sweden with freelancers in other parts of the world.

In dealing with such comparisons in the analytical chapters, there is a risk of conflating the participants' own comparisons with the analytical comparisons I make as a researcher. From my perspective, such comparisons, as used by the participants, are all valid to the extent that they are discursive strategies that allow them to create meaning around their work and their subjectivities. I engage with them as such in the analytical chapters. This is not necessarily to say that *I* think any of these comparisons hold particular weight as *the* comparison case to digital freelancing as a social phenomenon, neither does it mean that I view these comparisons as factual descriptions of the social world.

How to best present the themes and results in written text varied between chapters. These different ways of structuring the chapters have gradually emerged in relation to the development of the particular research questions and general arguments of the chapters. This has not been a straightforward process but usually required trial and error and several rewrites. As an example, chapter 8 was initially structured according to a form of typology of freelancing motives, where, for instance, those who accounted for their freelancing as a free choice and those who saw it as something imposed on them were different analytical categories. This categorization did not really work well, as it did not do justice to the data: Putting the participants in boxes almost seemed to violate the complexities and ambiguities of their narratives, as the interviewees often go back and forth between framing their freelance status as a free choice and a structural necessity. Now I instead present their accounts in the form of “tensions”, which refuses either/or dichotomies.

The chapters furthermore emphasize slightly different empirical materials based on what I think best answers their respective purposes. Chapters 5–7 mix interview material with different types of observational material, whereas chapter 8 almost exclusively uses interview data, as this chapter is more directly interested in how the interviewees, through their stories and accounts, form their subjectivities. When presenting quotes or screenshots of the empirical material, I have, in line with an abductive method, tried to pick examples that illustrate different and sometimes contradictory aspects of the data or that can problematize and expand my theoretical arguments. If conflicts or disagreements about a particular subject arise in the data, I explain this in the text as well as include material that highlights the different perspectives in order to nuance or challenge straightforward theoretical interpretations. Similarly, I often explain when a particular quote or data fragment seems to be common or representative of the data as such, in order to make it easier to evaluate whether a quote is reflective of wider patterns or not.

Now having presented the methodological and analytical strategies of the project, the rest of the dissertation is dedicated to the analytical chapters and the results.





# Chapter 5. Patchworking

I rather think the world is like sand. The fundamental nature of sand is very difficult to grasp when you think of it in its stationary state. Sand not only flows, but this very flow is the sand. (Kōbō Abe, 1972:99)

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Like the ever-shifting dunes of sand in Kōbō Abe's novel *Woman in the Dunes*, the platform economy is perhaps best understood in terms of flows — flows of information, capital, desire, attention, and affect. In the platform economy, more data is constantly being extracted, algorithms tweaked, user preferences changed, traffic flows redirected, new trends set, new business models invented, and new platforms introduced, all while others are forgotten or closed down. Being too reliant on one or a couple of platforms for finding gigs and income streams can be risky for digital freelancers, given that audiences can suddenly migrate to other platforms or the platforms can go bankrupt. To manage their careers, they may instead have to diversify their practices by using several platforms in an interconnected manner.

This chapter seeks to introduce the reader to the flowing social world that digital freelancers inhabit. The chapter's aim is partly descriptive, but it also sets out to analyze how digital freelancers respond to and develop tactics for retaining control and navigating this uncertain and ever-shifting environment. I begin by answering questions that, with varying emphasis, will also be returned to in later chapters. How do digital freelancers navigate the platform economy to make a living? And what strategies do they use to manage and immunize (Lorey, 2015) against the new forms of precarity generated by the platform economy?

To “set the scene” and help orient the reader, I start by introducing some of the platform types that digital freelancers use and combine to make a living. I present and analyze four types of platforms that digital freelancers interweave: 1) platforms for visibility and self-promotion, 2) gig and labor platforms, 3) online communities, and 4) platforms for supplementary income. I show how these provide opportunities for generating diverse income streams. However, as I also show, using them also intensifies workload and generates particular forms of precarity and dependence.

In the last part of the chapter, I introduce the concept of *patchworking* to make sense of how fragmented digital labor markets are navigated. I use this as an analytical metaphor to conceptualize how digital freelancers govern their careers in volatile environments where they, as Ticona (2022:18) notes in her study of precarious work and technology, have to “piece together patchworks of paid gigs

across many different labor markets”. I argue that patchworking includes a set of strategies and practices for dealing with labor fragmentation, precarity and multiplicity, by figuratively stitching together a living from several income sources.

With the patchworking concept, I want to create a more dynamic understanding of digital governmentality, which considers how it plays out “from below”. Patchworking is a set of self-governing practices which are simultaneously *imposed* from organizations, employers, and platforms with interests in normalizing non-standard, fragmented piece-work, and *adopted* by freelancers to manage and cope on a precarious labor market. Patchworking can thus be seen as a set of self-technologies (Foucault, 1988a) that let individuals govern and form themselves as flexible and adaptable worker subjects in labor markets that impose precarious and uncertain career trajectories and work opportunities. I argue that patchworking is both a result of and a response to this fragmentation of labor, which forces digital freelancers to diversify their skills, practices, and income streams over several different platforms to sustain their careers in flowing, uncertain settings.

## Setting the scene: Navigating the platform economy

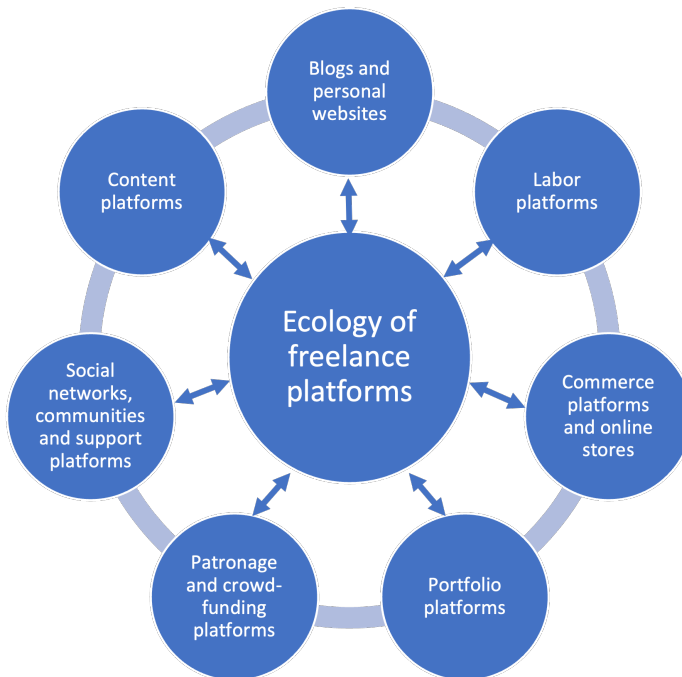
Previous sociological research on the gig economy has paid much attention to labor platforms — platforms like Uber, Bolt, and Deliveroo for services; crowdwork platforms like Amazon Mechanical Turk; and, to a lesser extent, freelance platforms like UpWork and Fiverr for creative work and IT work. The tendency for sociologists of work and labor to do case studies of particular labor platforms is perhaps not surprising, as it provides opportunities to explore and theorize how familiar modes of labor control and management associated with employed labor are transposed to digital platforms. Yet, as we saw in chapter 2, we know that labor platforms — despite many hyperbolic predictions from both techno-apologists and techno-sceptics — still only constitute a minor part of labor market transactions; as Fleming et al. (2019) note, this far, “Uber has not taken over the world”.

Far from diminishing the importance of the platformization of work, I argue that this requires sociologists to look *beyond* labor platforms and take a broader grasp of gigification. This entails acknowledging the multiplication of labor occurring in platform capitalism (Altenried, 2022), which produces workforces which are fragmented not only globally and spatially, but also over different platforms that allow different forms of value extraction. In doing so, we can bridge what Jarrett (2022a:24) recently called the “peculiar schism” between research on labor platforms and research on social media platforms, respectively, often with “very little cross-fertilization of ideas between the two fields”. Only then can we better understand how the platformization of social life is transforming the world of work.

The freelancers I have talked to and observed use diverse platforms for many purposes. Besides finding gigs and establishing income streams, they also use

platforms to market themselves, build networks and communities, and in various ways immunize against precarity. Such practices are often essential for them to be able to sustain their careers. In order to understand how digital freelancers patch together a living, I argue for a research agenda that places cross-platform practices at the forefront of the study of digital freelancers' work, rather than relying on isolated case studies of specific labor platforms. Such an approach puts emphasis on the social processes of how actors negotiate, use, combine, and attach meaning to different platforms, rather than on the specific technologies or platforms themselves.

To this end, this chapter approaches digital platform apparatuses as being interconnected in a “dynamic cross-platform ecology” (Poell et al., 2022:110). This helps to emphasize the relationality of different platforms (van Dijck et al., 2018). The platform economy works as what Madianou and Miller (2013) call a “polymedia environment”, where digital freelancers find themselves at the intersection of many different platforms that compete for their time, attention, and data. To navigate this environment, they must strategically combine and “synthesize them so as to optimize the economic value extraction upon which their [own] livelihood depends” (Matthews & Rouzé, 2019:61). This way, they may resist platform control and spread risk. Therefore, what I seek to highlight is not so much which specific platforms the freelancers use, but rather, the reflexive practices of using several of them in an interconnected manner.



**Figure 5.1.** A visualization of the ecology of freelance platforms based on which platforms the informants use. All platforms are connected to each other through their part in the wider ecology.

There is much variation in my data regarding which platforms freelancers say are the most important. One freelancer might swear by the necessity of using Instagram for marketing her work, while others prefer portfolio platforms like Behance (and many combine both). Someone else might be dependent on a labor platform like Upwork for finding gigs, while others find that type of platform difficult to integrate in their personal media ecology. Many consider it essential to have their own website, while a few manage to sustain a career without one. Regardless of which particular platforms that are used, it is often not enough to use just one or a couple. Platforms serve a variety of functions and offer different opportunities, affordances, and resources, which freelancers can combine strategically to manage their careers. The platform types in Figure 5.1 can nonetheless be described as follows:

*Blogs and personal websites:* Digital freelancers often have a personal website and/or blog where they provide information about themselves and their business. Blogs are sometimes used to post reflections on the creative process or provide tips and advice about life as a freelancer. They can also be a source of monetization through influencer marketing, affiliate marketing, or by hosting ads.

*Labor platforms:* For cultural and creative workers, notable labor platforms include international platforms like Upwork, Fiverr, and Freelancer, and Swedish platforms like Gigstr, Gigstep, or Gigway (the latter owned by the umbrella company Cool Company). These platform companies act as intermediators of gigs that connect freelancers with clients and take a fee or percentage (typically around 10–20%) of each transaction. They do not take any employer responsibility.

*Commerce platforms and online stores:* These are platforms where freelancers can sell or license creative goods directly to consumers. This can either be done by creating a personal digital storefront or by using e-commerce platforms like Etsy, MyFonts, Alamy, iStockphoto, Unsplash, Society6, and many others.

*Portfolio platforms:* These are used to show previously created works in order to promote one's competences. Specific portfolio platforms include Behance, Dribbble, Adobe Portfolio, and Illustratörcentrum. Portfolios can also be presented at websites and blogs, social media platforms like Instagram, or labor platforms like Fiverr.

*Patronage and crowdfunding platforms:* These are platforms where creators can receive tips and donations (on a one-time basis or during prolonged subscriptions) from fans and online followers. Include Patreon, Kickstarter, GoFundMe, Twitch, OnlyFans, IndieGoGo, Ko-Fi, and Buy Me a Coffee. In some cases, the donators receive exclusive content; other times, they donate purely to give support to a creator.

*Social networks, communities, and support platforms:* These are often social media platforms where freelancers can communicate, build networks, promote their brands, find work, and get inspiration, tips and support. This includes Facebook groups, Reddit, LinkedIn, Twitter, Clubhouse, Discord, and specialized forums for particular content or platforms. Labor platforms like Upwork and Fiverr have their own forums, which discourage communication outside of their own internal ecosystem.

*Content platforms:* These are platforms that combine social media functions with possibilities to create, upload, and in some cases, monetize user-generated content.

This includes YouTube (video), TikTok (short videos), Instagram (image and video), Twitch (video game livestream), Pinterest (inspirational images), and many others.

These descriptions show that, while platforms can be categorized as mainly belonging to one main category or another, they often have a diverse set of affordances that allow them to bridge several categories at once. Far from being restricted to one function, one and the same platform can put freelancers in direct or indirect contact with a variety of actors: clients, platform companies, other freelancers, consumers and prosumers, and third-party actors such as advertisers, interest organizations, or umbrella companies. While platforms steer, control, enclose, and capture value from digital freelancers, freelancers can also use them strategically to their own advantage when patchworking. In this way, the affordances and constraints of particular platforms create a “structured opportunity space” (Ibert et al., 2022:569) that shapes “the possible field of action” (Foucault, 1982:790) of freelancers when they govern themselves, and are governed by others.

All of the interviewees use a combination of the platforms outlined above, and most argue for the importance of establishing a presence that spans several of them. When asked how important digital platforms are for her business, the response from blogger and photographer Eva is telling: “I mean, it’s everything really. *All* customers find us either through Instagram, Google, or Pinterest”. She emphasized the central importance of maintaining an interconnected digital presence over several different platforms for being discovered by customers and clients, arguing that she could not keep her business going otherwise.

While digital platforms provide new opportunities, they also generate precarity through diverse and ever-changing algorithms, non-transparent rating systems, and obtuse risks of online invisibility or deactivation (Bucher, 2018; Duffy et al., 2019; Poell et al., 2022). Being on multiple platforms can therefore also be a form of risk-mitigation, to avoid being too dependent on one and the same platform (Hair et al., 2022). Content creator and illustrator Elinor spoke at length about this:

Elinor: You never really know which platforms will work well for your business. Or even, like, what platforms will be popular tomorrow. What works well today might not do so tomorrow. Platforms change or like ... Instagram might completely change their algorithm suddenly or something. And then you just, “Okay ... what should I do now?” (laughs). Sometimes, even whole platforms are closed down, and then you don’t want to be too dependent on it. If you’re only on one platform, then you’re taking a really big risk, I would say.

Elinor accounts for the importance of using several platforms by referring to the risk of being too reliant on those that, from one moment to the next, can change or disappear completely. Platforms come and go — some disappear while new ones are introduced. Being on several platforms is therefore a way of immunizing against the precarity of vital platforms suddenly changing or disappearing. However, being active on several platforms takes much time and effort, as freelancers must tailor

content to particular platforms and various “imaginaries” of their affordances, algorithms, and user cultures (Scolere, 2019; Duffy et al., 2019). Some platforms require registration or membership fees, and in order for a particular platform to “pay off”, freelancers might have to spend much time updating their profile, creating content, researching the platform, and communicating with other users. This also places great demands on digital freelancers to continuously develop new technological, communicative, and immaterial knowledge and expertise through self-organized social cooperation (cf. Fumagalli et al., 2019).

Several interviewees express that the sheer number of available platforms makes it difficult to get a good overview of the alternatives. How to establish a multi-platform presence and decide on which platforms to choose, how many, and so forth, is a matter of constant debate and negotiation, both among my interviewees and in various online communities. Self-optimization is here an important self-technology (Bröckling, 2016) for balancing quality and quantity in platform use. This requires freelancers to constantly develop their practices and to find ever-more effective and strategic forms of communication, so they can have a manageable quantity of platforms which allow them to retain a consistent feed. Filmmaker and social media manager Patrik told me about his recent decision to close down his Twitter account to instead use Facebook and Instagram as his primary marketing channels:

Partly, it's a question of time. It's difficult enough sustaining two social media channels, so if you add a third, there must be a point to it. It's better having a qualitative dialogue in fewer channels than having a lot of channels and no quality in what you do.

Patrik argued that you should strategically pick platforms that you think are most effective for the kind of audience you are communicating with or the kind of content you create, and not only maximize but also effectivize your online presence as much as possible. Having many social media accounts that are inactive or updated sporadically may result in discouraging rather than attracting clients, he reasoned.

Illustrator Olof metaphorically described the platform economy as a “jungle”, where it is never apparent which alternatives are best and which are a waste of time:

Olof: It's great with all the platforms that exist today, but it's also like a jungle. The question is, what works best? And ... my thought has been that I should be on as many platforms as possible. But I don't know — that's also extremely time-consuming (laughs).

In contrast to Patrik, Olof negotiates the perceived norm of maximizing one's online presence and being on as many platforms as possible by contrasting it with the time and effort it takes to do so and the uncertainty over what works best. This uncertainty over how to best navigate the “platform jungle” was for him a source of stress and anxiety. Being on many platforms and continuously seeking new ones out could increase his chances of attracting clients but would also require much time and

effort, which may not necessarily pay off. Being “everywhere” is seldom possible, particularly when one wants to retain a meaningful dialogue on all mediums.

To further orient the reader to some of the platforms digital freelancers use, as well as to the discourses and imaginaries reproduced through them, I find it useful to group them together in broader categories than those previously outlined in Figure 5.1, based on the functions they serve. Accordingly, in the following, I describe and analyze four different types of platforms which are essential for how many digital freelancers sustain their careers: 1) *platforms for self-promotion*, 2) *labor platforms*, 3) *online communities*, and 4) *platforms for supplementary income*. By providing different ways of finding gigs and incomes, marketing oneself, finding support, building networks, and protecting oneself against precarity, these platforms are important spaces for patching together a living. Together, these categories illustrate the fragmentation of freelance practices, which I will come back to in more depth toward the end of the chapter.

## Having your own space: Platforms for self-promotion

From previous research, we know that building one’s reputation and seeking recognition are crucial for many digital workers, as they must compete over scarce attention and visibility to make a name for themselves, build a self-brand, and attract clients (Gandini, 2016; Duffy & Hund, 2019). In the hype surrounding labor platforms that intermediate gigs for a fee, the more basic necessity for many freelancers to make their business discoverable and visible online is often forgotten.

The scarcity of attention and visibility online creates what Bucher (2018) calls a threat of “algorithmic invisibility”, by which it is seldom clear for users exactly why certain content is prioritized or what one needs to do in order to become visible to clients. This, in a curious way, reverses the Foucauldian panopticon as a model of power. From the threat of being constantly watched and surveilled, digital freelance subjects must govern themselves in relation to the threat of not being seen at all. To decrease the risk of algorithmic invisibility, this necessitates doing what Abidin (2016:90) in relation to influencers calls “visibility labor”, which describes the work of curating and managing self-presentations in relation to platforms, algorithms, and audiences, so as to become discoverable by clients online.

To generate visibility and promote one’s business, the freelancers in my data opt to use personal websites, blogs, portfolio platforms, and social networking platforms. While most participants recognize the importance of being on several different platforms, it is common to have at least one platform that works as a “base” or “main space” online. One interviewee described having her own “hub”, while another stated that “you must have your own room online”. One participant described her website as a “showroom”, and another stated that “your company needs a digital home”. This “digital home” — often something as taken for granted



in much research as a personal website — is then often linked to other platforms that host different types of content to attract different audiences. Through these other platforms, potential clients can then be directed back to the main space, which graphic designer Adam reasons is the place where you create trust:

Daniel: How important is it to have your own professional website?

Adam: I would say it's essential. Eh, it says everything about you, really. If you have good cases, that also says a lot about you. But the website, if you make a good impression from the start, then all the pieces are put into place. That's where you ... you cast out hooks elsewhere, but it's the website that those hooks hopefully lead people to. That's where trust is built. That's the start — where the first contact is made.

Adam makes an analogy between getting clients and catching fish, with his website functioning as a figurative fishing rod affording him to catch clients from different “ponds” — in his case, mainly by “casting out hooks” in Facebook groups and on LinkedIn, and by writing posts and linking to his website or Instagram, where he hopes to build trust through strategic impression management (cf. Goffman, 1990). This shows the often interconnected and relational nature of platform apparatuses, such as the symbiotic relation between a personal website and other platforms, as they draw and channel traffic and attention flows between them.

To generate trust, many use their “digital home” to collect information about their company, show work samples or testimonials from previous customers, share contact information, and, sometimes, list prices for their services. A mix of conscious strategizing, convenience, and trial and error often seem to determine which platform is used as the main space for self-promotion. Similar to Adam, most participants have a personal website or blog. Several expressed that such platforms afford them relatively much control over self-presentations, to analyze traffic flows and to present their works in a flattering manner, rather than having it dictated by platform owners and algorithms. Especially in contrast to labor platforms like Upwork, where reputation is algorithmically calculated and negative reviews from clients can make visibility almost impossible (see Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2021), the affordances of a personal website give freelancers much autonomy to curate an attractive image of oneself or to publish self-chosen recommendations from clients that paint them in a positive light, like Figure 5.2:

## REKOMMENDATIONER



"Had it not been for [redacted] extreme care for detail and hard work to fully comprehend my complete vision, I would not be where I am today. His patience with letting my ideas evolve organically and then organize the product in accordance has been invaluable to me and my work."

[redacted]  
Founder [redacted]

**Figure 5.2:** A recommendation review on a freelancer's website from a previous client (2022).

The flow of power in the platform economy is not unidirectional. If certain platform affordances seem too restrictive or punishing, digital freelancers can often opt for alternative platforms. This allows them to establish a relative degree of independence from the platforms they are simultaneously dependent on, and thus retain some control (cf. Glatt, 2022). Graphic designer José, for instance, describes his website as his “storefront”, where he sells a curated professional image of himself. He argues that he needs at least one platform where he is fully in control over his self-presentation, rather than having to rely on

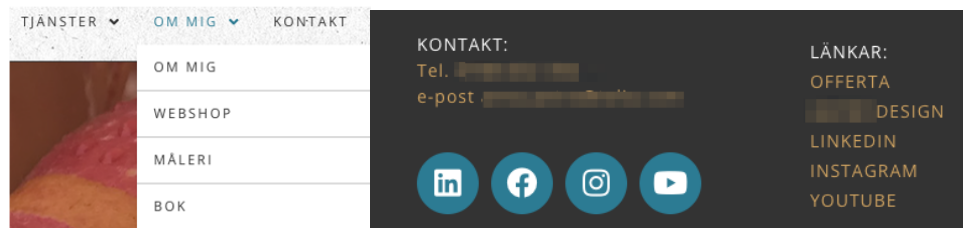
algorithms which you never know, like, what images they will highlight or even if people will be able to see what you post at all. On my website, I know that clients will see everything exactly as I intend them to. It's like, “I'm the one in control”. It's more of a curated experience.

Hanna (a photographer and social media manager) used a combined website and blog as the base for her digital presence. She detailed how she used the blog both to draw traffic and to display and develop her professional competence in writing:

When it comes to marketing and showing what I can do, I like to write an article on my website blog. And then from that, I can spread the information on Instagram and link to the article on Pinterest. I don't want to do “this, and this, and this” but rather have a common starting point that binds the different channels together. So, it's my website, Instagram, and Pinterest that I use to show what I can do.

In the interview, Hanna strategically reasoned for why certain platforms work best as her base and how different platforms can be interconnected. Her website blog is described as the “common starting point that binds the different channels together”.

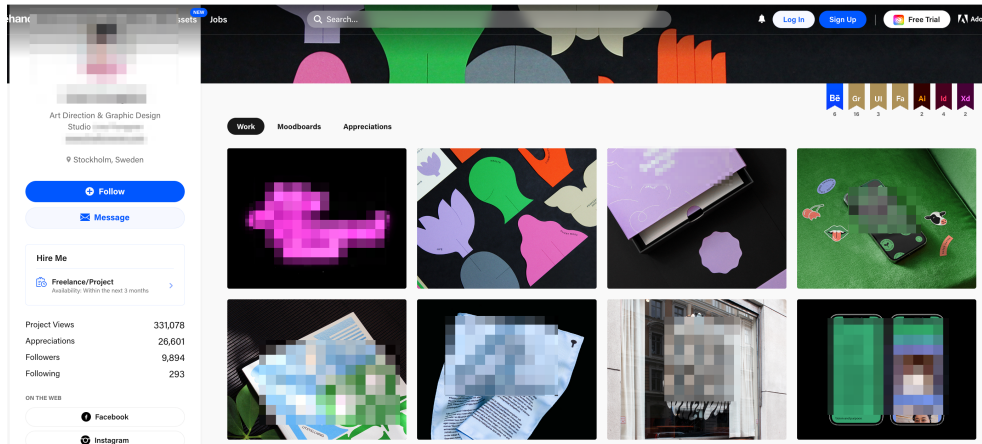
The main space, in this way, often works as a node connecting various platforms. This can be achieved through common website interfaces such as these in Figure 5.3, from the website of a graphic designer and illustrator:



**Figure 5.3:** Screenshots from the website of freelancer with links to other platforms (2023).

Interfaces such as these afford freelancers to direct the attention of potential clients toward specific platforms where they are active and want to be seen. In the left image, with the menu item “tjänster” (Swedish for “services”), she links to her website portfolio and information for the different services she offers (graphic design, web design, package design, logo design, illustration, videography, and photography). She also links to Offerta, a Swedish platform that matches the buyers and sellers of services, where you can also read customer reviews and ratings of her. Furthermore, she links to a separate website for her web shop, as well as sites for her art and a book she wrote. The image to the right is from the bottom of her website, where she also links to her Instagram, LinkedIn, her company’s Facebook page, and her YouTube channel, where she has uploaded different forms of content. From this brief description alone, we see how a variety of platforms are connected in a personal platform ecology (cf. Hair et al., 2022), where different platforms can provide visibility, attention, and, potentially, a variety of income streams.

However, not all the interviewees have a personal website. The illustrator and graphic designer Erik uses the portfolio platform Behance as his main space. Behance (owned by Adobe since 2012) describes itself as “the leading online platform to showcase & discover creative work” and as having “over 40 million members from around the world” (2022). The platform is a mixed marketing space, creative community, and marketplace. Behance offers visibility either by clients searching for specific competences (“graphic designer located in Stockholm, Sweden”) or by being featured in their project galleries. The platform’s affordances allow freelancers to upload previous work in a portfolio, follow and like each other’s projects, and mark if they are open for hire. Behance also offers a service to match freelancers with clients for a scaled fee depending on the size of the commission, starting at 5%. However, they market themselves as being more on the side of the creators than typical labor platforms: “Unlike other similar platforms, we charge both the client and the freelancer, and the freelancer will be charged less than the client overall” (Behance, 2024). A Behance profile can look like this:



**Figure 5.4:** A screenshot from the Behance profile of an art director and graphic designer. To the left, we see the metrics used on Behance (project views, appreciations, followers), as well as opportunities to follow or contact. In the bottom left, she links to her other social media accounts. On the right, we see the portfolio and, in the top right, various flags denoting the projects that have been “featured” by Behance. [2023].

Behance prides itself on its galleries being manually rather than algorithmically curated, based on a number of factors that the curation team talk about in a blogpost: “In addition to the quality and originality of the work, [we] also consider the presentation, context, and traction it’s getting in the community” (Behance, 2021). In this way, they market themselves as a creator-friendly and meritocratic alternative to the strict algorithmic control of social media platforms like Instagram, or labor platforms like Upwork or Fiverr. Affording an affective sense of control and autonomy can, in this way, allow platform apparatuses to attract valuable users.

Returning to Eric, he linked his Behance profile with several different Instagram accounts (one for his photography, and one for his illustrations), a Facebook page for his company, and an old Tumblr blog. While he had managed to make a living as a freelancer for ten years, he told me that the fact that he still did not have his own website made him self-conscious and uncertain. He said, “I should get a proper website and like, trim myself. Trim my professional image a bit. [...] . But I don’t know, it just feels more convenient [using Behance]”. Even though he found the affordances of Behance well-suited to his visual work, using Behance as his main platform created a sense of self-doubt. He expressed that Behance is a competitive platform where it is difficult to stand out and attract attention. “When I check there, I just don’t feel very good. You know, I don’t feel I have the skills... it’s pretty hard competition there”. Furthermore, for him, a website seems to be a symbolic line of distinction between “real” professionals and hobbyists. Using particular platforms rather than others is thus not only a practical question but also a symbol loaded with meaning for both freelancers and, potentially, clients.

When I asked Erik how he found most of his work, given his description of Behance as so competitive, he responded in a somewhat puzzled manner that he typically did not find commissions by actively hunting them. Instead, he got most of his jobs through word-of-mouth or clients finding him online:

Erik: Those things are so weird. I don't think I'll ever get to grips with it. Sometimes, when I post an image via some website or Instagram, then it might spread [and someone might contact me about a job]. But if I contact a customer or advertising agency directly and [...] hunt commissions that way, the old-fashioned way, it's unusual that I get anything. It just, like, comes to me in other ways.

Daniel: So, people rather contact you directly because they've seen your work somewhere [online] ...

Erik: Yes. Usually, I'm more dependent on them contacting me because they've discovered me. I seldom get work the other way. And that's special. It's an uncertainty in the industry.

Hunting commissions the “old fashioned” way through contacting clients directly seldom worked for Erik, who instead got most of his commissions by clients contacting him after seeing his illustrations or photos online. Exactly how this happens was often opaque to Erik, which made it difficult for him to see which platforms are worth investing time on integrating into his personal platform ecology. Erik told me that he routinely asks clients how they found him, but that it is difficult to detect any systematic patterns in what works and what does not. Conscious efforts at self-marketing online would not always amount to much, whereas posts he did not think much of himself sometimes could spread and create a life of their own. Finding commissions could, in Erik's experience, thus not really be planned for. By promoting himself on several different platforms simultaneously, he could however increase his chances of being discovered *somewhere*, he reasoned, thus somewhat offsetting the arbitrariness of being dependent on opaque platform apparatuses.

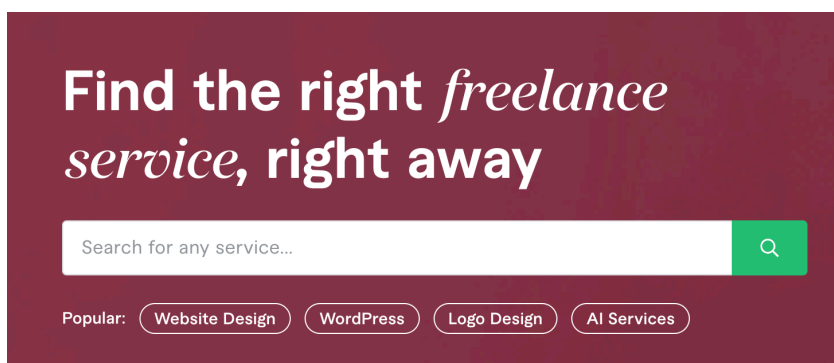
## Labor platforms and gig intermediaries

Digital freelancers can also use labor platforms to find commissions. These correspond to the platforms that the sociology of work literature has been most concerned with, and which dominate the public discourse on the gig economy. They function as what Matthews and Rouzé (2019:62) call “intermediation apparatuses”, which connect disparate actors — classified as independent contractors and described as “collaborators” and “creatives” rather than employers and employees — and take a fee from their transactions. Similar to the platforms discussed for generating visibility and self-promotion, they are sites for the

competition over attention and reputation. However, these platforms are somewhat enclosed ecosystems from the rest of the platform economy, which creates challenges for incorporating them into one's personal platform ecology.

Two of the largest international labor platforms for cultural freelance work today are Upwork (previously Elance-oDesk) and Fiverr. It is mainly these platforms that my interviewees have used, rather than the various Swedish alternatives.<sup>11</sup> While some interviewees use these platforms to find gigs, none use them as their primary source of income. On the contrary, labor platforms are, from discussions in my data, a source of ambivalence and contention because of their contribution to increased global competition and price dumping. Despite being controversial, these platforms are necessary to introduce in some detail, as they are important actors in reshaping freelance market dynamics and creating a global world of underpaid piece work (cf. Lehdonvirta et al., 2018), which also impacts freelance rates in Sweden.

Although neither Upwork nor Fiverr provide statistics over how many active registered freelancers they have, they are remarkably similar in how they market themselves. Fiverr (2023) — which according to online legend takes its name from having a \$5 price tag on all commissions when it opened in 2010 — describes itself as “the world’s largest marketplace for digital services [which] offers both buyers and sellers a digitally streamlined transactional platform”. Upwork (n.d.) writes that, for two decades, it has been “pioneering a better way of working, helping businesses find more flexibility and connecting talent with more opportunities. [...] As a result, we’ve become the world’s work marketplace”. Both platforms market themselves as providing companies with a flexible on-demand labor force of freelancers (or “talent”), which is easily hireable through interfaces like the following, which promise buyers they can find “any service” by just a few clicks:

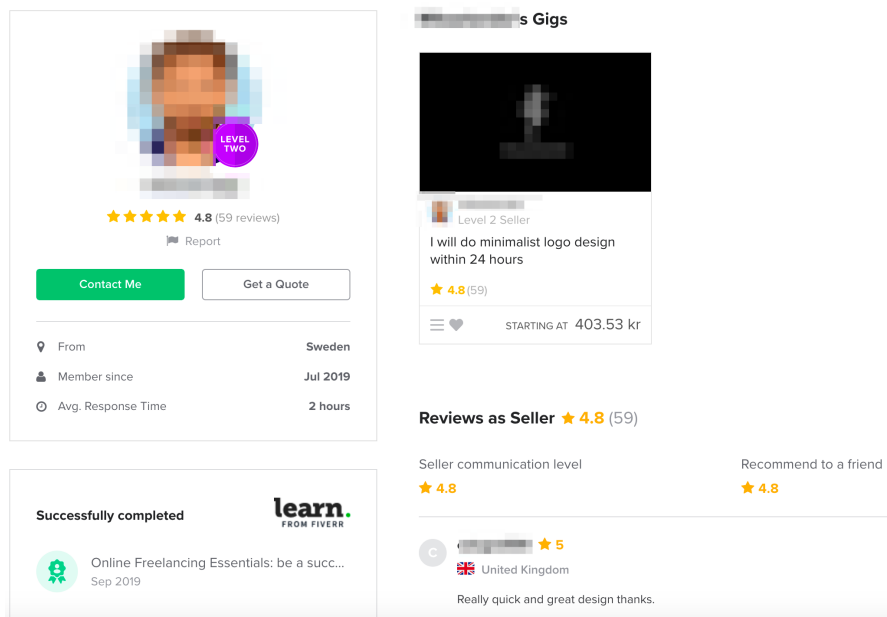


**Figure 5.5:** Fiverr's interface for searching for freelance services (as of July 2023)

<sup>11</sup> There are several Swedish platforms which have come and gone during the last couple of years, including Gigstr, Gigway, Freelansa, and Gigstep. Most of them seem to have little activity from my observations, and only a few of my interviewees have tried them.

Both Upwork and Fiverr have similar business models but feature different systems for how commissions are intermediated and charged. Registration is free on both platforms. Upwork charges a fixed percentage of one's lifetime earnings with a specific client: "20% for the first \$500 you bill your client, 10% for total billings between \$500.01 and \$10,000, 5% for total billings over \$10,000" (n.d.). In contrast, Fiverr charges 20% of each transaction, independent of how large it is (Fiverr, n.d.).

As we will see in chapter 6, gigs on both Fiverr and Upwork are often poorly paid. Freelancers create their own profiles, like the one below from Fiverr. The profiles show star ratings and reviews of the seller that are essential for which freelancers become promoted through the platform algorithms, as well as other information that the clients can use when deciding who to hire.



**Figure 5.6:** A freelancer profile from Fiverr.

Labor platforms like Upwork and Fiverr give digital freelancers less opportunity to build a strong multi-platform presence than some of the other platforms discussed previously. Where social media platforms often can be interlinked, platforms like Upwork and Fiverr are relatively closed ecosystems that "lock in" freelancers through their terms of service. These platforms have explicit rules against circumvention, that is, taking clients (or sellers) outside of the platform and making deals independently. With Andrejevic's (2004) term, this can be seen as a form of "digital enclosure", where platform apparatuses regulate and profit from the data commons and interactions of users. Upwork states that "you can't talk to another user or ask for or share a way to get in touch — a *means of direct contact* — outside

of Upwork before you've agreed to a service contract. This means you can't add your contact details to a job post, your profile, communications or other content" (Upwork, n.d.). Breaking the terms of service can affect one's job success score or lead to deactivation. This works as disciplinary technology that controls users by creating platform dependence (Srnicek, 2017:51; Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2021).

While freelancers, in my data, sometimes link to their Upwork or Fiverr profiles from other social media platforms or personal websites, they are not allowed to link back to these platforms from the Upwork/Fiverr profile. Neither Upwork nor Fiverr allow freelancers to take clients outside of the platform to negotiate. Communication is to be done strictly through internal messaging system. Upwork even censor the surname of freelancers (referring to them as "Kathy A." or "Robert B."), presumably to make it difficult to search for them online. Most obviously, this is a way to control and discipline freelancers so that they do not bypass paying fees on the platforms' transactions, which would threaten their business model. Upwork explicitly acknowledges this on their website, while also framing it as a way of "protecting" freelancers from the "dangers" of making deals outside Upwork:

First, it can hurt you. Giving away your contact and billing details makes you vulnerable to scammers and fraudsters. Second, it hurts our business too. We can't keep running our marketplace without the fee we get when clients pay freelancers (Upwork, n.d.).

Upwork encourages both freelancers and clients to engage in peer surveillance and to report if someone proposes to deal outside of their platform, so that Upwork can warn or disable that account. Rather than constituting a community of freelancers that promote collaboration and solidarity, Upwork in this way fuels platform entrepreneurialism and competition as ruling logics.

The topic of circumvention points to interesting lines of conflict between freelancers and labor platforms, as well as potential resistance (cf. Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2021). In contrast to, for instance, Uber drivers, who are dependent on the app for finding customers, digital freelancers have better chances of establishing a reputation independent of labor platforms. Freelancers have an interest in avoiding fees and promoting their wider online reputation, which labor platforms try to displace them from. Judging from my data, circumvention happens even though it is not allowed, and can be seen as a form of resistance that digital freelancers can exercise toward labor platforms. A few of my interviewees expressed that, while they do not use Fiverr or Upwork for finding commissions, they have used them for making deals outside of the platform or, as one of them described it, "fishing for clients". This is also occasionally discussed in various support platforms, as we will see in the next section. Yet, there are also obvious risks with circumvention, especially for those who find a lot of commissions through these platforms. Through circumvention, freelancers might lose access to their profile and internal reputation, which might jeopardize their future chances of being hired.



## Online communities and support platforms

Digital freelancers are often left to their own devices when figuring out how to best sustain their careers. By not being employed, they lack a workplace to go to, colleagues to talk to, and formal structures that can offer support if things do not work out as planned. Only a few participants were members of unions, and several expressed that they did not see any point of unionizing as freelancers. This makes supportive networks and platforms all the more important. Although these are seldom recognized in previous research on platform work as a crucial part of sustaining digital careers, I argue they are important to consider for how they can provide supportive contexts that freelancers might otherwise lack, which potentially can offset and help them immunize against precarity (cf. Lorey, 2015).

Networking has long been a central aspect of cultural labor markets, particularly for freelancers who, since before platformization, have been required to engage in “compulsory socializing” (Cockayne, 2016) and “performative sociality” (Gandini, 2016:62) outside of the formal working day to build professional relations and networks. While offline networks have not lost their importance, the extent to which my respondents had access to such networks varied considerably. In contrast, social networking platforms, forums, and other kinds of support platforms are available for everyone, and were important spaces for more or less all participants.

Several interviewees explained that loneliness and isolation are among the most challenging aspects of freelancing. Online communities can mitigate such feelings by offering social support and guidance to independent workers who otherwise operate on their own. Graphic and web designer Therese reflected on the loneliness of working place-independently and the value of having access to digital networks:

Therese: When you're working at a bureau, you have the benefit of everyone else working there who knows similar things and who you can learn from — like, sounding boards to share experiences with. You get extremely lonely [when freelancing]. So, it's great with [digital] networks, where you can ask, like, “I would like to do this, but I don't fucking know how. Does anyone have a solution?” And then you get good answers that you can use. So, the knowledge you need [as a freelancer], if we're not counting courses you take, it's much from searching on the internet [...] or asking in the networks. Mostly in Facebook groups, that's where most of the knowledge exists and you get the quickest answers.

Therese referred to Facebook groups as the best source of information and support for freelance-related issues. She also used LinkedIn often but told me that she experienced LinkedIn to be much more of a competitive platform where it is more important to market oneself as a knowledgeable professional. Online communities can expose freelancers to peer judgement and surveillance. It can be strategic to share advice, knowledge, and expertise, as this can boost one's reputation, leading to future collaborations or job prospects. Yet, engaging in these settings is not a pure

cynical or instrumental practice. It also contributes to the reproduction of community ethics, with informal rules for how to behave in relation to other freelancers. Arvidsson (2014:122) argues this can generate a “entrepreneurial solidarity – a solidarity between small entrepreneurs, each exploiting a common set of shared skills and competences and each eking out a living on the margins”. We see this clearly in how Therese described Facebook groups as a necessary tool for allowing her to build a support network that she would not have access to otherwise:

Therese: There is a Facebook group, or a couple of groups that are very nice and supportive. Where no questions are too stupid and the vibes are good [...] Everyone is like, “God, that happened to me too, but I solved it like this”. Everyone rushes to help and support [...] Since there are regulars you talk to and recognize the names of, it almost feels like you are pals, even though you aren’t. You only have a digital image of the person. But you can follow each other on social media, if they are on LinkedIn and Facebook and Instagram. And some of them I’ve met live.

Supportive platforms can provide a sense of professional affinity with other gig workers, which can be drawn upon when one needs help or wants to develop solidaristic identities (Maffie, 2020). Online communities like Facebook groups — which many interviewees point to as important — are, for instance, used for everything from discussing laws and regulations for self-employment, to selling goods, organizing “IRL” events and network meetings, giving marketing advice, discussing pricing strategies, warning against non-serious clients, and organizing resistance against exploitative platform practices.

Digital communities are also used for making collective sense of different platforms and their algorithms. Establishing a multi-platform presence can be difficult, due to an abundance of alternative and the rapid pace by which platforms and algorithms change. By the time one has managed to establish a certain set of competences or presence on a platform, the “rules of the game” (Bourdieu, 1984) may have changed. Therefore, many use support platforms to ask for advice. In speculating about particular platforms, digital freelancers often evoke what Bucher (2018) calls various “imaginaries” about how they work. Such discursive imaginaries are drawn on when freelancers argue for why they have chosen certain platforms over others. For instance, in one Facebook group, a freelancer posted, “I think it’s really difficult finding my way. Where is everyone finding jobs? I’m a member of Freelancer and Upwork, but that’s mostly for jobs abroad, which is not really an alternative for me”. This was answered with over 20 comments, including:

Sanna: I got many replies recently when I posted on LinkedIn (I love LinkedIn!). But you don’t want to advertise too much there 😊

Ida: Try to be visible everywhere! Work with SEO [search engine optimization] for your website so that you come up in searches, work with Google Ads, be active in your social media channels and advertise, be active in Facebook groups where your

clients might be, and so on. Even if Fiverr is good for being discovered, don't forget that their fees for freelancers are super high! I only use it as a storefront and take all jobs outside through my company.

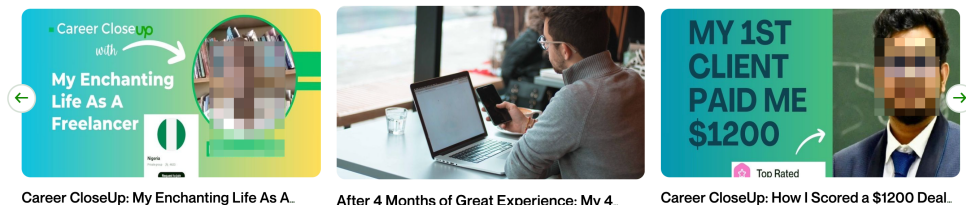
Matthias: [...] If you don't have a personal website and online portfolio, then it's over. They might not trust you are who you claim to be, and it's also a question of — how can you advertise your client if you can't advertise yourself? I'm always chocked when I hear that freelancers don't have their own website and online portfolio. It's still super important, folks! For bigger companies, it can also be an advantage to hire ME! (shameless promotion) 😊 See my portfolio: [link to website].

We see how the Facebook group simultaneously works as a setting where freelancers collectively can make sense of how to best utilize digital platforms, and use it as a space for self-promotion. By answering the original question, Sanna, Ida, Matthias, and others also draw attention to their own businesses and display their own competence in navigating the patchwork ecology. Matthias even does so explicitly, in what he himself refers to as a “shameless promotion” of his portfolio. Such interactions furthermore allow freelancers to control and govern each other, by establishing and upholding certain standards and norms for how the freelance collective should behave (cf. Moisander et al., 2018:391).

While digital communities can be important and meaningful, it should not be underestimated how “affectively charged interactions between users can [also] be valuable to capitalism in providing normative pressures that underpin the desire to contribute this labour” (Jarrett, 2022a:108). Giving users the means to communicate with each other can tie them to a platform, providing it with valuable user data and network effects. While Facebook, for instance, gives freelancers the space to develop social cooperation, community knowledge, and shared commons independent of employing organizations, it is at the same a major commercial actor which encloses and profits from these same interactions and commons through means of expropriation (Hardt & Negri, 2009:141).

Giving users the opportunities to influence and shape platform practices can give users a semblance of autonomy, which does not necessarily correspond to their actual possibilities to change how the platforms operate. Labor platforms like Upwork and Fiverr, for instance, have their own “communities”, with discussion forums and blogs, where they encourage freelancers to ask for help and discuss. On their community frontpage (Fig. 5.7), Upwork highlights blogs with titles such as “My Enchanting Life As A Freelancer”, “After 4 Months of Great Experience: My 4 Upwork Golden Rules”, and “How I Scored a \$1200 Deal on Upwork for My First Client”, clearly reproducing normative discourses and cultural imaginaries of freelance work as desirable, profitable, and easy. Positive and aspirational thinking is encouraged, whereas negativity and critique is discouraged.

## Trending



**Figure 5.7:** Trending blogs from Upwork's community page.

In the Upwork forum, both freelancers and clients can discuss a number of issues related to the platform, ranging from ratings to prices, refunds, frauds, technical issues, and much more. Yet, these discussions occur within the boundaries and control of the platform. Community guidelines and moderators determine what topics the users are allowed to discuss. Gegenhuber et al. (2021:1475) argue that through such communities, gig platforms provide workers with “microphones, i.e. limited voice on pre-defined issues that can be muted, but refrain from giving up control by providing megaphones, i.e. enabling crowdworkers to speak up freely and co-determine platforms’ decisions”. Building on these metaphors, Wood and Lehdonvirta (2021:1384) argue that if such labor platforms provide “microphones”, the workers they talked to experienced them as often broken or inaudible, offering few possibilities to voice systemic feedback or critique.

Moisander et al. (2018) discuss how “community mobilization” can function as a technique of biopower that “secures the efficient functioning of the free enterprise and serves the economic objectives of the organization”. This is how I think communities on platforms like Upwork and Fiverr must be understood. They provide an ideological context for freelancing and present “the community as an antidote to the depredations of market forces” (Moisander et al., 2018:377). Support and problem-solving is outsourced from a management function to users themselves, who collectively have to make sense of their situation as self-responsibilized entrepreneurs. This way, these platforms produce digital enclosures (Andrejevic, 2004) where the social cooperativity of freelance communities is drawn upon to filter engagement toward their own platform. Discussing bugs, violations of rules, or advice on how to be a more successful freelancer propel freelancers to invest more of themselves and their human capital and data in the platform. To voice more structural critique against high platform fees, unfair algorithms, or low payments, freelancers may, however, have to turn elsewhere.

In blogs by digital freelancers and in Facebook groups, I have observed several conversations where labor platforms like Upwork, Fiverr, and Freelancer are critiqued or forms of resistance are discussed. There are instances in my data where these platforms are referred to as “greedy” and “exploitative” in profiting on the

transactions of freelancers and keeping them within their own platform. Sometimes, freelancers discuss how it is possible to avoid fees while still using the platforms to one's advantage. In one Facebook thread about these platforms, an interaction similar to this one took place, where the issue of circumvention from the last section was discussed in the community:

Sanna: What's bad about them is that they take a 20% fee of what you earn for themselves, from all of your clients. That means that you have to take the client outside of the platform and deal with them independently. I always do that, fuck no that Upwork should take that much money from me ☺

Lisa: But that is against their rules. You risk losing your account if you do that.

Håkan: @Lisa: Yes, and I read somewhere that you can be forced to pay several thousand dollars if they find out that you're doing that.

Sanna: @Lisa: I don't care, I can't stand them. I only take maybe two clients out from there a year anyway.

Sanna: I usually charge the first commission through them. But if the client comes back, they usually email me directly, and then there's no reason to go through the platform. Then no rules are broken.

Simon: @Sanna: Thanks for the advice. Now I have to decide if I'm brave enough to break their rules.

Sanna: Haha, I've done that for three years. But if you do the first job through them and invoice for yourself after that, then you're safe.

This dialogue exemplifies how Facebook groups can be used for collective sense-making and for sharing strategies and tactics for not being exploited or treated unfairly. With a mix of moral judgements (whether these platforms are fair or not, and whether it is okay to breach their rules of conduct), factual arguments ("it is against their terms of agreement"), and rumors ("I read somewhere that you can be forced to pay several thousands of dollars"), they negotiate how to engage with these platforms in the best fashion and strategize how they can turn what are perceived as unfair working conditions to their advantage. In finding loopholes and strategies, they develop a form of counter-conduct (Foucault, 2007a:268) and resistance against the perceived unproportioned power of labor platforms, with some users proposing to boycott unfair platforms (cf. Salamon, 2019).

Support platforms are discussed more throughout the coming chapters. To summarize, for now, it is adequate to point out the double role of support platforms in providing contexts where freelancers can discuss, get help, and combat loneliness and precarity, while also working as biopolitical technologies that mobilize digital freelancers as labor and channel their productivity toward platform entrepreneurialism.

## Supplementary incomes and digital “side hustles”

The notion of the gig economy is today often used to describe the transition from a world of supposedly stable, standard employment, to task-based contracts and gigs that are both “short, temporary, precarious and unpredictable” (Woodcock & Graham, 2020:9). However, from my data, it becomes necessary to think of gigification in broader terms, as several participants combine commission-based incomes with non-waged, supplementary income streams. The latter aligns better with what some have recently referred to as “digital hustling” (Ravenelle, 2023; Ens & Márton, 2021) — a notion of which the connotations to criminality and sex work do not fully translate in a Swedish context, but which Ens and Márton (2021:2) define as “the constant search for economic opportunity outside of traditional employment structures” for getting by, by using different types of digital platforms. In my data, digital freelancers complement commissioned work with various non-waged supplementary incomes, including selling goods through e-commerce platforms or by setting up digital storefronts, monetizing cultural content online through influencer or affiliate marketing, or using crowdfunding platforms.

Setting up alternative income streams and side-hustles aligns well with the celebratory imaginaries of platform capitalism that highlight supposed opportunities for anyone to make money on “what they love” (cf. Duffy, 2017). A popular idea like “passive income” is, for instance, expressive of an ideology where you put in an initial amount of work to create and market content so that the enterprise can then “run itself” and generate money independent of current commission flows. Such discourses — which several interviewees draw on when accounting for their own practices — are today reproduced in many books within the self-help and business literature on how to create flows of passive income through the internet, such as *Passive Income – Beginners Guide* (Jacobs, 2023), *Passive Income: The Proven 10 Methods to Make Over 10k a Month in 90 Days* (Thomas, 2016) and, in Swedish, *25 sätt att tjäna pengar när du sover* (Translation: *25 Ways to Make Money While You Sleep*) (Wästlund, 2020). There, we can read statements like “Do you dream about achieving true financial freedom? [...] What if you could earn money while you sleep, or while you spend quality time with your family and friends?” (Waters, 2016:6p), connecting these discourses to ideas of financial freedom and not being reliant on a “regular” job.

Encouraging workers to engage in digital hustling and establishing alternative income streams is also in the interest of digital platforms, which profit from the user interactions, content, and data that such practices and lifestyles provide. In a “business guide” on Fiverr (2023) called *34 Best Side Hustle Ideas to Boost Your Income*, they recommend everything from starting a reselling business, to offering transcription services, selling homemade crafts, creating and selling online courses, monetizing a blog, responding to compensated online-surveys, and being a pet-sitter. They write that 16% of all Americans earned money from online side-hustles in 2021, and that the “side hustle should be something you enjoy doing, or at least

something you're interested in. This way, it won't feel like work and you'll be more likely to stick with it". Side-hustling is connected to wider discourses of passion and of making money on what one loves doing (cf. Duffy, 2017).

In addition to being reproduced by platform companies and business literature, content platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok contain an ever-growing amount of advice, gossip, and speculation from users on how to develop side incomes. Such examples show how these sorts of discourses are reproduced by creators themselves. Such videos are instructive of the discourses surrounding how to develop supplementary income streams. In one such video among countless others, titled "9 Passive Income Streams For Artists & Content Creators That I ACTUALLY use" (Kay, 2023), a YouTuber discusses the following strategies for monetizing artistic expression and cultural content:

1. Starting a YouTube channel
2. Selling tools of the trade
3. Selling an eBook
4. Selling a course
5. Creating a membership program
6. Investing in stocks
7. Affiliate marketing
8. Licensing your work
9. Running ads on your products or platforms

While these activities are presented as something everyone can do with a bit of effort, several of them demand an already established follower base. These activities further differ greatly in how much of an initial "investment" they need in terms of time and money. Licensing photos to an image bank need not take much time if the photos have already been taken in another context. However, other "passive" income streams can demand extensive amounts of labor in exchange for uncertain rewards and may steal time and focus from commissions or other jobs (Abidin, 2016; Duffy et al., 2021). Calling these incomes passive — while true in some cases where continuous, sustained effort is not needed past an initial investment — can thus conceal the labor that goes into establishing and upholding them, as well as their dependence on a popularity principle which disfavors workers who are not already established or who lack big followings on social media (cf. Glatt, 2022).

Several respondents have supplementary income streams similar to those recommended in the video above. Some viewed this as a coping strategy for dealing with job insecurity and unpredictable income flows. For others, it reflected a desire for self-mastery (cf. Ens & Márton, 2021) and to gain control over how their creativity is monetized. Such desires often seem difficult to realize in practice. Establishing alternative income streams may require more work than anticipated or yield modest returns that are hard to sustain over time. Furthermore, respondents note the arbitrariness of what works and what does not, which makes it challenging

to “plan” for success. Some invest considerable time in generating income streams that yield minimal results, while others stumble upon lucrative opportunities unexpectedly, which they then have re-oriented their whole company around. One thing often leads to another, which illustrates the need for digital freelancers to seize emerging prospects as they appear (Virno, 2003).

Sara is one interviewee who combined freelance gigs with many atypical income streams. Her main income came from journalistic and writing gigs, lectures, and influencer collaborations through her blog and social media. She had also released a book and actively tested new strategies for monetizing online content. Moreover, she intentionally avoided ads and affiliate marketing on her blog, even though they could prove lucrative, because she thought it would compromise her brand integrity. Instead, she opted for more personal ways of monetizing her platforms through collaborations with companies who pay her to talk or write about their products and brands in her channels. Particularly early on, Sara said that to get paid for such collaborations (rather than being compensated with products or similar, see Duffy, [2017]) required intensive sales and pitching work, as well as producing high-quality content that attracted a large enough reader following:

It only took a few months before I got my first offer about a very small collaboration, but [in the beginning] I put in an *extreme* amount of time. I planned for a year before I launched the blog about target group analysis and design and how the market worked, and I studied search engine optimization and all kinds of things.

When I spoke to her, Sara did not need to spend as much time looking for influencer collaborations, as her brand had become more established and companies often contacted her directly. Nevertheless, she expressed that it was sometimes difficult to find companies to collaborate with that are both willing to pay reasonably and have a profile which fits the values of her brand.

To not be as dependent on clients, Sara had, at the time of the interview, also recently started a membership program for her blog readers through the platform Patreon, which is one of the biggest crowdfunding platforms (Bonifacio, 2021). According to unofficial Patreon database Graphtreon (n.d.), they have almost 300 000 creators as of December 2023 and estimated monthly payouts of \$23.9 million. Patreon takes between 5–12% of every transaction plus payment processing and payout fees (Patreon, 2024). Through Patreon, Sara provided exclusive digital content to subscribers who pay a fixed amount of either 5€, 25€ or 50€ per month. She saw this as a way to make up for lost income during the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, she hoped this would help her take control over her creative output by creating for her followers and charging them directly.

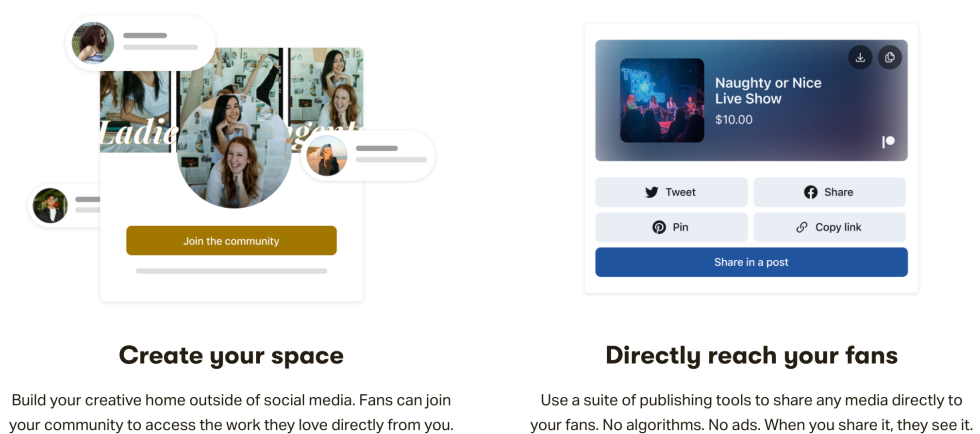
Sara: I do this both to free up more time to create content for them [my followers]. Like, I do exclusive stuff for them. But I also do it so I can put more time on creating content generally, so I also get something out of it. [...] But it's very long-term work, it takes time. I haven't even ... I currently work towards 50 patrons. It's a very slow



grind. But it has still given me positive effects based on this with the content creation, which I think makes it worth it anyway.

What Sara describes as a “very slow grind” highlights the active work required to establish and sustain “passive” atypical income streams. This can also conflict with other essential tasks. A little more than a year after our interview, Sara wrote a blog post where she announced the discontinuation of her Patreon. She declared that while it had initially provided her with some extra income, the platform did not yield sufficient growth in subscribers to justify the time and energy she invested in creating exclusive content. Furthermore, the high fees of Patreon meant that the money she gained through these practices was negligible at best. As a result, she spent much time producing content locked behind a paywall which was only accessible to a fraction of her readership. Sara wrote that the experience took a toll on her own confidence, as well as her faith in the crowdfunding model.

Sara’s experience of Patreon is representative, perhaps, of the challenges facing small creators using crowdfunding models. If we look beyond her individual experience and focus on the collective and systemic challenges these platforms produce, the promises of giving creators more independence and control exposes them to very volatile and unpredictable market trends and consumer patterns.



**Figure 5.8:** How the crowdfunding platform Patreon market their services on their website (2023).

We see above how Patreon markets itself as a “creative home outside of social media” and as offering creators a chance to “create your space” and “share any media directly to your fans. No Algorithms. No ads”. They frame their platform as a space where creators themselves — rather than corporate interests and algorithms — control how content is shared and consumed. This way, they prompt creators to participate and generate value in the digital economy through promises of helping them “regain [their] creative freedom” (Rouzé, 2019:49), all while

profiting on their aspirational attempts. Furthermore, due to the importance of network effects, platforms like Patreon often demand a sizable following in order for creators to become profitable, which disadvantages those without large audiences (cf. Srnicek, 2017). One study of Patreon transactions finds that earnings on the platform are highly skewed: The “top 1% of campaigns make at least \$2500 monthly—while the majority of all campaigns attract only negligible amounts” (Regner, 2021:134).

To establish sustainable income streams, several interviewees emphasize the importance of continually testing new platforms in order to be “first on the ball”, as photographer and social media manager Hanna told me, and gain a head start for exploiting new business opportunities. This necessitates an opportunistic attitude, which Virno (2003:87) describes as a central part of the “chronic instability” of the affective post-Fordist climate. As a category of subjects, Virno (2003:87) argues that “opportunists are those who confront a flow of ever-interchangeable possibilities, making themselves available to the greater number of these, yielding to the nearest one, and then quickly swerving from one to another”. To seize opportunities as they appear, to be among the first to try out the latest platform, and to come up with new ways of getting paid for cultural content in the digital age are part of the practices which platform apparatuses promote and exploit.

Hanna combined commissioned work with affiliate marketing on her blog and selling photos to image banks. She expressed being stressed over the lack of commissioned work and reasoned that she should try to come up with new income streams to balance things out. She saw side-hustling as a way to monetize the otherwise uncompensated downtime which comes with freelancing. “I could work more with affiliate marketing, for instance, and I’m part of a picture agency [Swe: *bildbyrå*], for instance. I could take more photos for that, which would give more money”, she told me, considering different alternatives. She was also thinking about developing web courses: “I would love if my company could educate private persons in photography with whatever equipment they have. [...] So, creating web courses or even simple guides or whatever — that’s what I’m looking into now.” Even though the income Hanna currently gained from such sources was small, her reasoning draws on the imaginaries of passive income streams and digital side hustles as potentially lucrative future alternatives.

Similar to Hanna’s ambitions to start web courses, other participants have also experimented with various course platforms. Susanne recently launched a web course in photography through a Swedish learning platform. While she had no previous experience teaching, she saw this as an opportunity to use her proficiencies in photography to generate income streams which were not commission-based. “It generates some money, so it’s not so bad. [...] It’s just another type of income”, she reasoned. When I talked to her, only a few people had applied to the course. Since she was compensated based on how many registered, she felt pressure to market the course herself, essentially doing free labor for the platform. Furthermore, while her lecture material was uploaded online (and thus could be re-used), she still had to

communicate with those taking the course and grade their assignments, which meant that upholding this income stream over time demanded quite some work.

Other participants had experimented with web shops and selling goods online, either through their own website or through commerce platforms. A few had used Etsy to sell prints or homemade items. Etsy, which is focused on homemade commodities, crafts, and vintage supplies describe their platform as a “global online marketplace, where people come together to make, sell, buy, and collect unique items. We’re also a community pushing for positive change for small businesses, people, and the planet” (Etsy, 2023a). They take a listing fee for every marketed item, a 6.5% transaction fee of the sales price, and a processing fee of 4% (Etsy, 2023b). To circumvent the fees of such platforms, a few others had instead built their own web shops. Content creator and photographer Matt had a shop on his website where customers could buy framed prints of his photos. While he had only sold a few photos this way when I talked to him, he reasoned that “it doesn’t pay a lot, but you know, it still trickles in some money now and then which is nice, sometimes when you have nothing else going. Small streams make great rivers [Swedish: *många bäckar små*]”. He had plans to market the web shop more intensely through his Instagram to attract more customers, with the hopes that it could supplement his commissioned work more.

John (an illustrator) had on his part tested out a few different platforms for selling his designs and told me that he was looking into how he could expand his business with similar income streams:

John: I have a couple of accounts where I sell prints and stuff with texts that I’ve designed that aren’t customer-related. So, some money is trickling in there. Sometimes, I upload stuff there which I’ve created just for fun, so sometimes I make some money on that too. So they [his image], like, come to use.

Daniel: Okay. Do you do that on any particular platforms or through your website?

John: I’ve chosen some different platforms. Society6 is one, don’t know if you’ve heard of it? It’s international and enormous where many [creators] sell stuff. You can get it [prints and designs] on shower curtains or t-shirts or posters. So, I’ve had that one for quite some time. Then I have one called TeePublic which is oriented to t-shirts. So, I try to upload stuff there sometimes too.

John said that he did not earn any big sums from these platforms, but he seemed pleased with some extra money “trickling in” occasionally. Similar to the discourses discussed before, Society6 boast their mission as being to “empower creative expression. We support artists both seasoned and new by providing a marketplace for selling their original work, helping them find their voice and connecting them with fellow artists and customers across the world” (Society6, 2023). However, they only provide 10% of every sale to the creators. In very similar jargon, TeePublic

(2023) frame their business model as “Empowering Independent Creators to Turn Their Passion Into Profit”. They pay their artists as follows:

Competitive Artist Earnings				
Every purchase made on TeePublic supports your hard work as an independent artist!				
Product	Regular Price:	You Earn:	On Sale Price:	You Earn:
Classic T-Shirt	\$22.00	\$4.00	\$16.00	\$2.00
Classic Hoodie	\$39.00	\$4.00	\$32.00	\$2.00
Crewneck Sweatshirt	\$38.00	\$4.00	\$30.00	\$2.00
Stickers	\$2.50	\$0.75	\$2.00	\$0.50
Art Print 18" x 24"	\$29.00	\$7.00	\$23.00	\$4.00
<a href="#">See Full Chart</a>				

Figure 5.9: What TeePublic pay designers for their main products (2023)

Such earnings, which are passive in the sense that the creators are not required to do very much after uploading the designs, could potentially stack up for those whose designs become very popular. But once again, as previous research has shown, such platforms tend to create “a few huge successes and an extremely long tail of content that has little engagement” (Kenney and Zysman, 2019:27), with the feeds (algorithmic or curated) often promoting creators who are already popular, who live up to arbitrary selection criteria, or who “do not disrupt the neoliberal status quo: white, male, middle class, heteronormative, brand friendly” (Glatt, 2022:3865).

To sum up, alternative incomes can provide digital freelancers with additional streams of income during periods when they do not have commissioned work. However, among my interviewees, such income streams are mostly small and often difficult to sustain. This points to the difficulties for such digital business models to actually deliver their promises to empower cultural producers. While they can deliver some extra money, it is often questionable whether it corresponds to the time invested. Whether such attempts at establishing passive income streams prove successful for individual digital freelancers or not, they are valuable for platform apparatuses that take fees from transactions and enclose their data and activities (Jarrett, 2022a). It may thus be that promoting these sorts of activities through celebratory discourses and imaginaries works more in the interest of platform capital — and less in the interests of the freelancers themselves.

## Patchworking, labor fragmentation, and diversification

Thus far, I have given an overview of some of the platform apparatuses that digital freelancers can draw on to make a living, but what does it entail to make a living in the environment just outlined? Based on my data, I argue that the combination of not being employed and being dependent on ever-shifting platforms that normalize piece work and atypical incomes, generate a fragmentation across time and space (cf. Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). Platforms disconnect freelance work from local contexts, intensify competition, create new atypical income venues, and make workers dependent on ever-changing algorithms and affordances. This fragmentation creates new opportunities, but also presents challenges.

What I call *patchworking*, I see as both a result and response to labor fragmentation, precarity, and competition. On one hand, patchworking functions as a technology of domination that impel freelancers to diversify their skills, practices, and income sources in order to make a living. Patchworking thus produces the kind of flexible, multi-tasking, and adaptable subjects that platform capitalism needs. On the other hand, patchworking also serves as a technology of the self (Foucault, 1988a), that can help subjects manage precarity and protect themselves against contingency. By governing themselves to find individual solutions to structural problems — such as creating patchworks of income from multiple income streams and developing a multi-platform presence — they can potentially get ahead and even gain a sense of empowerment when they are successful.

Patchworking can be contrasted with the notion of gig work, typically understood as short, “low-skilled” tasks mediated by labor platforms (Fleming et al., 2019). Recent research has rightly pointed to the importance of multiple jobholding in the gig economy (e.g., Ilsøe et al., 2021; Smith & McBride, 2021; Kristiansen et al., 2023). However, I argue that a sole focus on jobs and gigs misses the multi-platform practices by which my participants make a living. While patchworking can be seen as a response to the gigification of the labor market, it traverses different expertise, jobs, income streams, and platforms. As an analytical lens, patchworking extends beyond the focus on jobs and commissions to also encompass the sort of non-waged incomes discussed above, such as passive income streams, influencer collaborations, selling goods online, or creating digital courses — all part of the hybrid positionality of digital freelancers (Armano & Murgia, 2017).

There is much heterogeneity in how my interviewees patch together a living. Over time, they often seem to have quite organically developed a diverse set of platforms, practices, networks, clients, and income sources tailored to their specific expertise. They also often combine freelance commissions with other income sources. Some have secondary jobs: two work part-time at cinemas, one combines her digital freelancing with having a designer store (both physical and online), two had at times worked hours at a radio station, and a few worked extra in healthcare or elderly care. Furthermore, the interviewees do commissions for clients both within cultural industries (online media, content bureaus, newspapers, advertising agencies, book

publishers, TV production companies, museums, cultural institutions) and outside of them (municipalities, local companies, non-profit organizations, et cetera).

To exemplify how my participants are patchworking, we can take the example of Alice, a photographer and content creator in her mid 30s. She started freelancing when studying to prepare herself for a labor market she already then knew lacked employed positions. For ten years after her studies, she combined photography gigs for magazines with what she called non-creative side jobs, ranging from working at cafés to being a dog sitter. In 2017, she started a travel blog, which eventually grew into the focal point of her brand. In addition to the writing, photography, and lecturing gigs that Alice has carried out for a range of clients, influencer marketing had grown into a major part of her income when I interviewed her. When I suggested that her working weeks must look very different, she laughed and said, “Oh god, yes. There’s no order in them. The days in a week don’t look the same either. I always adapt in the moment to whatever commissions and obligations I have, week for week”. When asked to expand on what she does outside of her role as a blogger and photographer, she told me that she does whatever she is tasked to do:

Alice: I’m writing mostly reportages [for magazines], but I’ve also done some other writing jobs. And I give lectures. And I work as a tour guide on travels. I also test products and give feedback ... not only in my own digital channels [but also give feedback to companies about products that haven’t yet been released]. I’m sure there are other things I can’t think of right now. But if I’m asked to do something, I do it. Next, I will look if I can put together digital lectures, to broaden that palette too.

Daniel: Okay, so you really juggle many things at once (laughs).

Alice: Yes, I have no limit really (laughs). If something seems exciting, then I do it.

Patchworking for Alice entails having multiple income streams stitched together from creative gigs, extra jobs, and digital hustles. To manage as a freelancer, Alice argues that you have to opportunistically grab chances as they appear, to seek new enterprising opportunities everywhere, and not say no to any offer (cf. Virno, 2003). “I have no limit really”, she says proudly, accounting for flexibility and adaptability as necessary traits for managing one’s career. Through such self-descriptions, we see the contours of a patchworking, multi-skilled, ever-adaptable, moldable creative subject take form. To transpose Mezzadra and Neilson’s (2013:115) observation of financial traders, freelancers like Alice “sell not a pre-defined set of personality traits but their ability or potential to *become* the right person, the one required by their employers (or by the market) as circumstances change”.

While patchworking is tied to discourses of entrepreneurial autonomy, it is not necessarily something that digital freelancers can choose to opt-in for, as for many it is a necessity. Freelancers’ work arrangements are characterized by a specific temporality that generates precarity (cf. Norbäck & Styhre, 2021; Choonara et al., 2022). My interviewees often drift through periods of alternating overwork and

unemployment, fueled by seasonal cycles and shifts in demand. Income levels are often fluctuating and meager, with payments arriving irregularly. To guard against income insecurity, digital freelancers may have to combine short gigs with longer or more regular collaborations. Some expressed that longer projects or repeating gigs are preferable because they give a larger degree of predictability. Marcus, a freelancer who produces film and photo content for social media and advertising agencies, reasoned that mixing different kinds of commissions, jobs, and incomes is once way of managing fluctuating levels of work and pay:

It never ever really gets safe [...] But you can still ... you can get pretty well paid if you do a big commission, which can cover your costs for like a few months. But you never know when you'll get the next one. So, you have to be thrifty and try to grasp like, "Okay, how do things look for the next three months?" And try to complement it with smaller commissions, and maybe some side job or side income too.

Marcus points to the need of being "thrifty" and adaptable in order to not only manage periods with little work but also to put money away for pensions and unexpected expenses. Others talk about the need to continuously look for more work, even during periods when they have more work than they can handle. Whether one is able to successfully adapt to these structural pressures or not becomes important for how the freelance career is experienced. Designer Nils accounted for this as very challenging:

Nils: You have to be good at so many different things, or at least have a strategy for all these different parts of your life. You have to be a marketer, a project leader, a designer, a networker. You have to be in all these different arenas and do things the right way. That's absolutely very challenging.

"A marketer, a project leader, a designer, a networker" are all designations that point to different but interrelated skills which digital freelancers need to have when patchworking. These correspond more or less to particular types of platform apparatuses outlined previously, where some are appropriate for marketing, others for finding gigs, and some for networking and getting support. In having to combine all these skills, my material supports McRobbie's (2016a:27) observation that, for cultural workers, "being a specialist rather than a multi-skilled 'creative' is becoming a thing of the past". Digital freelancers instead often have to adapt a broad position as a generalist "jack of all trades" (c.f. Norbäck, 2022; Glatt, 2022) — or a patchworker — to diversify their skills and to use several different platforms.

The need to diversify as a response to fragmentation is, in my data, often expressed through metaphors, such as not "putting all your eggs in the one basket" or having a company "with several legs". Such metaphors do not only come from the freelancers themselves but are part of discourses and imaginaries of platform entrepreneurialism that are reproduced online and imposed by companies with stakes in the platform economy.

The umbrella company Frilans Finans (n.d.) lists “Don’t put all your eggs in one basket” as one of their top 5 tips on their website: “Doing your thing is not the same as blindly relying on one client to carry your business for all eternity. [...] try finding more clients to minimize the risk that you will one day stand without commissions”. Another umbrella company, Cool Company (n.d.), writes that such expressions “while old, [...] summarize concepts of the spread of risk and diversification”. In addition, the website Svenska Nomader (2021) — which describes itself as “Sweden’s biggest meeting place for digital nomads” dedicated to promoting place-independent freelance work — writes that the Covid-19 pandemic showed that the diversification of freelancing practices actually creates “a new form of security” on the labor market:

freelancers often have several clients, which creates a new form of security. If a client is forced to reduce your hours, then maybe they can be increased by another client. If a client has to let you go completely, then you still have others left. It’s called diversification and follows the same logic as when you choose a successful stock portfolio [Swe: *aktieportfölj*].

Comparing diversification with investing in stocks makes the entrepreneurial logic of these discourses all too evident, basically framing diversification as an investment in oneself and one’s career (Bröckling, 2016). The description of diversification as a new form of security points to the labor market of atypical work as a new normality (Lorey, 2015), which workers must adapt to in the absence of reliable social safety nets. Imposing patchworking practices and diversification thus has a clear function for platforms, by producing a labor force that is accustomed to the new labor market and which reproduces it through their practices. This is visible on support platforms where digital freelancers collectively try to make sense of their successes and setbacks, often by drawing on the kind of diversification discourses just discussed. For instance, when aspiring copywriter Håkan asked in a freelance Facebook group, “How do you guys manage to make a living on this?? I have difficulties finding enough jobs, it feels so discouraging ...”, he was answered with several replies similar to this one:

Amanda: Analyze what you’re good at and try to diversify. What other legs can you add to your business? That way you can attract a broader range of clients and reduce risks of not having enough commissions. Think about what you can offer to clients, some might be more willing to hire you if you can offer them more than just writing. [observation from Facebook group].

Håkan is encouraged to engage in self-reflexive introspection, to analyze his strengths and weaknesses as if they were part of a costs-benefits analysis, and to strategize how he can get ahead by diversifying and adding “other legs” to his business. It is worth noting how similar Amanda’s response is to the company discourses above: She adapts the same discursive vocabulary when reasoning what



is required from digital freelancers today. These vocabularies seem to have trickled down to be socialized as a form of “common sense” among some freelancers. When I interviewed content creator Sara, she also echoed similar discourses:

Sara: Your business needs several legs so that you don’t put all your eggs in one basket, because that’s so vulnerable. You should have different legs of income that can be more or less stable at different periods. I think *all* companies today should have at least one digital leg... I mean some kind of digital opportunity to make money. [...] That has become noticeable now during Covid, how important that is. Those that already had a digital leg got an enormous head start, while those that didn’t have that really were challenged, to find out how they could make money [over the internet].

In just one sentence, Sara accounts for how both having a business with “several legs” and “not putting all your eggs in one basket” works as a buffer against precarity. Talking about the importance of having at least one “digital leg”, she refers to having atypical income streams outside of paid commissions that can also generate money during periods with little work. In this way, developing alternative or passive income streams over different platforms can be a way of developing what Ravenelle (2023:8) calls “a ‘side-hustle safety net’ of multiple income sources to create a semblance of job security and income stability”. In line with this, the illustrator and content creator Elinor succinctly told me that “to be satisfied with what you already have is like asking for future unemployment”. The general wisdom seems to be that it’s important to continuously change, develop, and look for new work opportunities and contacts, if only to stay afloat in a state of “non-stop inertia” (Southwood, 2011).

The illustrator Olof described this constant “juggling” as one of the most difficult things with being a digital freelancer:

Olof: That’s maybe the toughest thing I think, that you have to do it all at once. It’s a bit like juggling. Even if you currently have a lot of work, you must seek more commissions at the same time. That’s really difficult. You just never have time for it. And then when you have no jobs ... then you’ve failed, then it’s too late. So, you must always keep the juggling balls in the air, in some way, and that takes energy. Like, extra energy. And it’s easy to lose that energy or, like, forget that “oh shit, I haven’t really updated my website in a year”.

Daniel: So especially if you have a lot of work at the moment, then you might not think forward in that manner? That you must still work on securing more work?

Olof: Yes exactly. It’s ... yeah. I’ve thought about it a lot actually. Some illustrators are very good at it. And then you wonder, “How do they do it? How can they have enough time for that?” Both for creating illustrations, and then having time for all social media and all platforms and updating [with new] images all the time.

Juggling different platforms and tasks — carrying out paid work at the same time as looking for more work, marketing oneself, putting out new content online, and updating one's platforms while also researching new ones — works as a metaphor for patchworking. Olof compares himself to other illustrators who he imagines are more successful, wondering “How do they do it?”, emphasizing how the need to diversify is demanding both in terms of time and energy.

To have a company “with several legs” by combining several income streams, inventing new business opportunities, and continuously re-inventing and re-educating in a state of “perpetual training” (Deleuze, 1992a:5) does not only produce fragmented practices but also fragmented labor subjectivities. Illustrator Erik said that he saw diversification as a way of coping with uncertainty and fluctuating income. He mainly wanted to take illustration gigs but expressed that it was impossible for him to make a living doing only what he is most passionate about:

It's a highly insecure business (laughs) Like, that's why I'm a photographer and designer too. The illustrators that *only* [illustrate] are either *really* fucking good at it and make it work somehow [...] or they have part-time jobs and do it on the side.

Erik told me that even though he does not particularly enjoy commercial photo gigs, he has a separate Instagram account for that side of his career and is planning to promote it even more, as he finds it easier to make money on photography than on illustration. Romantic-idealistic desires of being a successful illustrator here clash with more pragmatic reasonings of making enough money by adapting to what the market demands and values. Susanne similarly told me that she would like to make a living solely as a photographer, but that she was currently taking courses to broaden her other competences in order to find enough commissions. She received part of her income from news outlets and reflected that today “you have to be able to do anything” and that “you must be, like, *multi*” to get commissions. I asked her about how she dealt with needing such a broad competence:

Susanne: Lately, I've been taking some commissions for [a television company]. Then you really need to be able to film and interview and edit and write text. It's so many things, and I'm used to only taking photos. It's a bit ... it's pretty difficult (laughs). [...] I've always felt it's difficult to write, so I guess I've [tried to not think about it too much] and just say, “Things will be okay”. But now, I realize more and more that I really need to learn to do it. So last year, I took a journalism course and an online course in communications. I try to develop that bit.

To be “multi” and keep up in the multi-skilled competition, Susanne had to invest her own leisure time, energy, and money on competence development and re-education. Several other participants who have been freelancing for a longer time told me how it has become more and more difficult to “only do one thing” since they started out, due to increased competition, shifting demands from clients, and

the need to constantly learn to use new platforms. Therese, who has freelanced for over 20 years with graphic- and web design, expressed how the labor market had come to require a much more generalized competence, which forced her, like Susanne, to enroll in further education to fit changing demands:

I'd like to work with graphic design ... that's what I'm best at. But now I have also re-educated myself in social media, content and... yeah, managing social media channels and doing digital market analyses and such. [...] And that's how it is today. You're not one or the other. Previously, you could be hired as a graphic designer and only work with print design. But today, you have to be eight roles in one. That's difficult to match, because you can't be that good at eight or ten things. [Clients] want you to be ... be a master at everything. Preferably also at making coffee (laughs).

Therese points to the ambivalent relation between generalization and specialization, and what she perceives as a demand to “be a master of everything” and “eight roles in one” — more metaphors for the ideal patchworker. By joking that you should “preferably also [be a master] at making coffee”, she ironizes over the slightly absurd demands to also be good at mundane tasks. Therese displayed a strong sense of resignation when I talked to her, showing that the fragmentation of labor generates anxiety and cynicism, characterized by Virno (1996) as some of the defining affects of post-Fordism. When I spoke to her, Therese had trouble finding commissions. She reflected that one of her previous mistakes had been to “put all her eggs in one basket” and rely on the same clients as a consultant for an extended period without simultaneously seeking to grow her network or find new clients.

Therese: I had the same customers for a few years. I worked as a consultant for companies for several years and ... and because of that, I didn't look for very many other gigs. So, when that ended ... you know, that thing with putting all your eggs in one basket. You make mistakes like that. You know it's not good, but it just becomes too much (laughs). [...] So, when the regular clients disappeared for different reasons ... things simply became very difficult.

To make sense of her own difficulties in navigating the precarious freelance waters, Therese positions herself against the discourses of differentiation and “not putting all your eggs in one basket”. Having several clients and combining different income streams is framed as a security measure for when things inevitably change. Yet, seeking new clients when you already have work requires both time and energy, which for Therese became “too much” to handle. This made her blame and critique herself for failing to live up to the ideals of being a successful, flexible patchworker.

## Concluding remarks

This chapter has introduced to the reader the setting in which digital freelancers make a living. While the platform economy enables new ways of making money on cultural content, I have argued that it also generates fragmentation and precarity by dispersing work through time and space over many different platforms. This is expressive of the multiplication of labor in platform capitalism (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Altenried, 2022). To understand how digital freelancers navigate the platform economy and cope with precarity and fragmentation, I introduced the concept of *patchworking*. This concept underscores how digital capitalism compels and prompts freelancers to diversify their skill sets, practices, and income streams to sustain their livelihoods and stitch together patchworks of income.

I have argued that patchworking is practiced over multiple digital platforms simultaneously. Conceptualizing these as platform apparatuses interconnected in a digital ecology, I explored the tensions between platform-based governmentality and the forms of resistance and counter-conduct they give rise to. Moving beyond case studies of particular platforms, this approach allow us to grasp the practices of moving through and sustaining a career in a digital economy characterized by a constant interplay between platform-mediated gigs, side incomes, and work beyond these platforms. Focusing on these aspects, I add to the emerging literature on multi-platform practices among cultural workers (Scolere, 2019) by contributing to calls for a more “holistic approach to the platformization of cultural production” (Poell et al., 2022:17).

While cultural workers have long been more likely to work on project and gig-basis than most other professions, I argue that patchworking represents a slightly new tendency on the labor market, both for them and potentially also for other groups of workers, which points beyond salaried work as an organizing principle (Alacovska, 2022). This chapter shows how the platform economy normalizes not only selling one’s labor on piece or project basis but also combining it with various non-waged incomes and side-hustles with often modest returns. Normalizing such practices among subjects makes them more easily available to buyers of labor power as well as platform owners profiting on user data and interactions.

Patchworking might not fully immunize digital freelancers against a precarious labor market, but it can help them manage themselves and grasp opportunities within it, in some cases even turning it to their strategic advantage vis-à-vis competitors. At the same time, patchworking produces subjects that fit the demands of digital capitalism well — they are flexible, adaptable, opportunistic, ever-available, multi-skilled and multi-tasking. These characteristics become part of the contours of the digital freelance subject, which will be further fleshed out in the coming chapters. The following chapter explores how patchworking careers may, for instance, drive digital freelancers to engage in and normalize unpaid and underpaid labor, which is often a necessary condition for sustaining these careers.



## Chapter 6. Working for free in the platform economy

Working on the edge, losing my self-respect  
For a man who presides over me  
The principles of his creed  
Punch in, punch out  
Eight hours, five days  
Sweat, pain and agony  
On Friday I'll get paid  
This ain't no picnic – (Minutemen, 1984)

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The fine tradition of anti-work songs, ranging from a popular classic like Dolly Parton's "9 To 5", to Bob Dylan's "Maggie's Farm", to countless punk songs like Minutemen's "This Ain't No Picnic" quoted above, tends to paint a similar picture of working life: authoritative bosses, hectic schedules, misrecognition, alienation, boredom, physical toil, "sweat, pain and agony" – endured only for the paycheck at the end of the week. Such narratives seem far from the cultural imaginaries of digital freelancers. Self-motivated, passionate about their work, and often not primarily driven by financial motives, many interviewees detail the constant struggle of convincing clients that their work "ain't no picnic" and that they deserve pay just like everyone else. Yet, there may be months or even years before digital freelancers are able to demand fair pay. Long after having become established, unpaid labor of different forms trickle down through their social relations and everyday life, with platforms further intensifying existing demands to work for free or for little money.

Similar to the longer history of cultural and artistic work (cf. Gerber, 2017), digital freelancers often attach other kinds of value to their work than monetary gain. Yet, imaginaries that they work for fun or pleasure (cf. Hesmondhalgh, 2013:255) have long served to legitimize exploitative practices by devaluing cultural production as professional work. In line with this, when I asked content creator and blogger Marie if she receives many requests to work for free, she answered with some irony, "Oh yes, you do. Because 'it is like that' within culture, or whatever. What you're doing is fun, so you don't need to get paid for it (resigned laughter)". Imaginaries of platform work as hobby production fuel such expectations; the illustrator Erik argued that clients "just don't get [that you need to get paid to

survive]. Just because you work digitally, they think it's your hobby. Yeah. 'You're just doing this because it's fun, right?'”.

Moving beyond work-for-fun narratives, this chapter explores un(der)paid labor as a structural necessity in digital freelance markets. We saw already in the previous chapter how sustaining a freelance career by patchworking requires much work outside of paid commissions. This chapter dives deeper into the unpaid work needed for sustaining a patchwork career in the platform economy. It sets out to answer: How are the lives and careers of digital freelancers entangled with the performance of unpaid and underpaid work? And how is this unpaid work negotiated, normalized, and given meaning by digital freelancers themselves?

The chapter shows how there is both continuity and change in the unpaid labor of digital freelancers; old familiar forms of unpaid labor in the cultural industries are complemented and/or intensified through platforms that push for new forms of platform entrepreneurialism. While unpaid labor is a core feature of digital freelance markets that allow corporations to extract value from freelancers, I show that it is not always *experienced* as exploitative. By exploring how digital freelancers negotiate, account for, criticize, justify, and give meaning to unpaid labor, we can better understand how it is normalized as a structural feature of platform capitalism. In particular, by attending to how subjects make unpaid and underpaid labor understandable, the chapter contributes to the understanding of how unpaid “hope labor” (cf. Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013) is entangled with the production of subjectivity among digital freelancers. Even when they are not compensated with money, digital freelancers often account for how they get *something* out of working for free, thus allowing this work to become a point of identification and investment for them while simultaneously reproducing unequal and exploitative labor relations.

## Paid in piecemeal: Value, prices, and negotiation

Taking paid commissions is the part of digital freelancing which most directly corresponds to what “work” means in public imaginaries, that is, tasks done for clients or employers that are compensated with wages or fees. As we saw in the last chapter, receiving monetary payment is however not straightforward for digital freelancers in fragmented labor markets. The contractual model of freelance work functions as a biopolitical technology that puts a number of different costs and risks on the freelancers themselves, while channeling their everyday life and freedom as autonomous subjects in ways that are productive for capital (Moisander et al., 2018).

Due to the lack of collective agreements, digital freelancers must negotiate contracts on an individual basis for specific gigs. This can make them susceptible to price dumping and wage theft, particularly in situations where they have little bargaining power (Bucht, 2022). Writing business proposals, and negotiating contracts and fees, are time-consuming, uncompensated tasks that are easily

rendered invisible but are nonetheless part of the informal labor all freelancers must carry out. Freelancers are furthermore often in a dependent position vis-à-vis clients, which can make it difficult to demand fair pay. Filmmaker and social media manager Patrik reflected on this power asymmetry:

Patrik: If you're an independent cultural worker who get commissions, then you are typically in an underdog situation. You need to set a price on what you're doing, and I think that most people in that situation would set a lower price than what they are worth, for various reasons.

Patrik reasoned that the risk of losing a commission if demanding too much pay contributes to the underdog position. If a client thinks the price is too high, there is always someone who will work for less, especially with platforms increasing the creative reserve army of young, aspirational workers (cf. Cohen, 2012). Patrik said this makes it difficult to be too picky, as you often have to accept underpaid gigs if you want paid work at all. Freelancers can set prices on a "take it or leave it" basis, but without a sufficient economic buffer or a steady flow of commissions, this risks leaving them without an income or souring existing business relationships. This was visible in a Facebook group when a freelance writer (Annette) asked for help:

Hey freelancers, I need advice and encouragement! For the first time for several years, I've been contacted by a magazine I wrote more for before. That's fun, and I'd rather not sour the relationship. But now they want me to write a text for a price that is 1000 kronor BELOW what they paid before, when it should be 1000 kronor MORE after all these years. It's the usual story about a tough situation and a bad budget. I lose all motivation to work in a climate where I have to choose between having no clients at all or working for fees that stand still or even go backwards. What do you think? Do you accept commissions anyway, or do you starve? [observation].

Annette wrote this in 2023, when living costs in Sweden had exploded due to high inflation. Despite this, she expressed being offered considerably less than she had been paid a few years ago, which aligns with reports of stagnant or even reduced wages in the media sectors in Sweden (Nesser, 2024). We see how Annette reasons around wanting to keep the business relation despite her labor being devalued. In the comments section, many other freelancers offered their support and shared similar stories of how the rates for freelance gigs have become lower while living costs have skyrocketed due to inflation. "I usually want at least one of these three components, all three are the dream – good pay, exiting project, fun people to work with", one commentor chimes in, "But right now you sometimes have to accept working without any of them just to put food on the table". Another commented that she had stopped working for a major media company because their rates have remained unchanged for several years: "I just got so sad when I sent the invoice and did the math on how much I would actually be paid per hour". She had to take a side job to be able to pay her rent. A third commentor writes,



If a client doesn't want to pay more, it doesn't matter how wrong you think it is. There's (sadly) often someone who's cheaper. That's how capitalism works. Sure, you can always say no, but if you don't have any other income or are not very sought after by clients, it can be difficult. If one's business idea doesn't work then one simply has to think about something else to do instead. That's the crass reality.

Annette writes that she agrees but that it is sad how demands to be ever-more-efficient for ever-less-pay makes it so difficult both to support oneself as a freelancer and to deliver quality work, which degrades writing as a craft. She sums up with a somewhat defeated sentence: "Maybe the conclusion must be as you say, time to move on and find something else to do — or find a new business idea".

The example above shows of issues of pricing and negotiating can have affective consequences on freelancers' self-confidence and subjectivity. To effectively negotiate prices, digital freelancers must step outside their role as creators and adapt an enterprising role. For most interviewees, especially those with strong artistic leanings, this is, at least initially, challenging. Many here draw on popular psychological jargon, such as having an "artistic" temperament or an "introverted personality" that is not well suited for negotiation and having to promote the self. In this vein, Lizabeth, who started freelancing in her 50s, attributes her difficulties with negotiating prices to her personality:

Daniel: Was it difficult when you started your company to find customers who would pay you fairly?

Lizabeth [graphic designer, web designer]: Well ... it was more that I wasn't used to demand payment. When you're employed, you have your wage. But when you're your own, you think ... "Ugh" [In Swedish: *oj, usch*]. I've been too cautious, and I have thought that "I can't take such a high price per hour, I'm not professional". You know, you knock yourself down. So, I sold too cheaply in the beginning. And some of those customers, I still have left, and it's difficult to increase the price now and say that "from next year, you will pay twenty-five percent more". That doesn't work.

In line with the dominant scripts and discourses of an enterprise culture, Lizabeth draws on an individualistic framing of the contractual relation by which she internalizes responsibilities and pressures from the market. Getting paid too little is not framed as an exploitative relation. Rather, it is legitimized through reference to psychological "lack" — the lack of self-confidence, self-esteem, the right temperament and personality, sufficient marketing skills, and so on (cf. Scharff, 2016). Lizabeth's difficulties to form an enterprising subjectivity and to recognize herself as a valorizable subject (Weeks, 2011) becomes an explanation in her reasoning, if not a legitimation, for why she is underpaid. Being underpaid is further justified with reference to her professional relation with the client, which she says could be jeopardized if she would suddenly ask for more money.

Similar to Lizabeth, many of the freelancers express that it was particularly difficult when starting out to set prices on “themselves” and their skills and to avoid the pitfalls of market-mediated work. Many say it is difficult to know “their *own* value”, as if their subjectivity is part of what they sell to clients.

Online communities and support platforms are generally an important source of information and a space to discuss prices. Freelancer Facebook groups in particular are full of questions, advice, and discussions about pricing strategies and reasonable compensation. My observational material contains many posts with questions like “Graphic design of a book cover, how much do you charge? Per hour or fixed price?” or “I’m a newly examined social media manager. What is reasonable pay? Do you charge per commission or per hour?”, which often create discussions that highlight the large variation in pricing models. “It’s a bit like asking ‘How long is a rope?’” one poster replied in one of these threads, arguing that price depends on many factors, including the type of job, the client, and one’s previous experience.

In several cultural sectors in Sweden, interest organizations and unions have tried to counteract low freelance rates through price recommendations. Some interviewees referred to these, including the Association of Swedish Illustrators, the Swedish Association of Communication Agencies, the Association of Swedish Advertisers, and Swedish Association of Professional Photographers. These organizations have no means of enforcing their price standards on the market for freelancers without collective agreements, but they can be used by freelancers in negotiations to motivate their prices and to get a sense of how much they should be compensated in a Swedish context to cover taxes, pension, social expenses, and so on. Whether they can enforce such prices is however heavily dependent on their individual bargaining power (cf. Movitz & Sandberg, 2009).

Newer branches of digital culture production, like online content creation or influencer marketing, put digital freelancers in a particularly vulnerable pricing situations (see Duffy, 2017). While interest organizations like Influencers of Sweden can offer guidance, the participants who made money from these activities as their main or supplementary income expressed that it was difficult to motivate their prices to clients. Content creator and copywriter Marie, partly making money on influencer collaborations, argued that one difficulty was that it “is such a new line of work, so there are very few guidelines” on prices. Another interviewee called the market for influencers the “wild west”, with clients making shamefully low offers and many influencers still not quite knowing the value of the services they provide or how to motivate them to clients. Sara exemplified that

[Companies] say, “You can get these shampoo bottles, or you can have these clothes if you put in on your blog”. And many bloggers just say [that it’s] “nice to get free stuff”. Eh, and they put [the collaboration] on their blog or Instagram. [...] and there’s so much that has been strange here, just because no one has known how this works [in terms of taxes and prices]. Neither the companies nor the bloggers. [...] And this lack of knowledge has made really many companies think that influencer marketing

is really cheap. You can just send stuff to someone. You don't even have to ... you know, you don't need to do anything. It's free. That's how many companies think.

Sara told me how she, in the beginning, had to deal with many companies asking her to work for no monetary compensation at all, with receiving various products as her only compensation. She explained that one issue was that it was still difficult to quantify the economic value of these forms of production. Given that it is a form of immaterial labor where neither the time working nor the value of the affective relations produced are easily measurable (cf. Hardt & Negri, 2009:135), setting a price according to conventional measures is difficult. Simultaneously, cultural imaginaries that construct this sort of work as fun hobby-production rather than "real" work (cf. Duffy, 2017) contribute to the difficulties of demanding fair pay.

For commissions, digital freelancers are usually paid per hour or in fixed-piece rates: per project, per photo, per article, per logotype, per status update, per illustration, per website, per word, or, as Cohen (2012:148) disheartedly jokes, "per-haps". Although pricing models can be more or less suitable for different types of gigs, all the interviewees reflect on some common issues, which are both mentioned in the interviews as well as in support platforms. Per-hour rates set by the freelancer correspond most directly to invested labor time and are more flexible and adaptable to changes. Depending on the budget, per-hour rates can include overhead costs such as time for preparation and planning, research, business meetings, travel, and communication with the client. Several interviewees saw this as a great advantage with per-hour rates, as it gives leverage to adapt prices to the amount of work they put in. Lizabeth, a web- and graphic designer who normally charges per hour, told me that when her clients argue about the price and say that something takes too long,

I call them immediately and say, "Okay, let's look at why it's expensive. You e-mailed me ten times yesterday. You've asked me to change a lot of things [in the product]". Then they understand that they use my time, and that my time costs money.

Communicating with clients and continuously making changes based on their demands and preferences can easily become an invisible part of the labor process, which is difficult to charge for in a pre-determined, fixed price. Charging per hour gives Lizabeth some degree of control over her pay rates. Yet, she complained that communicating with clients like this can be very arduous and time-consuming, especially if the client has a limited budget and continuously has to be convinced that they are paying for actual work.

Graphic and web designer Therese reflected that per-hour rates can create problems if a client heavily underestimates the time it takes to plan and produce a commodity: "Maybe they think it takes ten hours to do it, but it turns out it takes 100 hours". Therese, as other interviewees, had experiences with delayed payments, clients refusing to pay the full sum, or straight-out wage theft. She reasoned that this makes it important to have a transparent and continuous dialogue with clients from the beginning, so that they understand what they are paying for.

Some participants describe strategies for how to cut corners when working with exploitative contracts. Illustrator and graphic designer Erik expressed that “the better you become, the easier it becomes to adapt as well. Just because something is badly paid, you don’t need to spend a lot of time on it. You learn to compromise. Like, adapting the level of detail [in the illustration]”. Adapting and compromising quality to what he is paid functions here as a form of resistance against unfair pay (cf. Norbäck, 2021a). Erik told me that “If I’m presenting a business proposal, I give three price models. One cheap, one expensive, and one based on their requests. [...] And in connection to that, I present illustrations with different amounts of detail”. That way, he can resist demands to overwork for little pay.

Compared to per-hour rates, fixed rates per piece or project are predictable for both freelancers and clients. However, while fixed rates can include overhead costs, many freelancers told me they often do not cover all the work and resources which is expended. For clients, this can make them preferable for value extraction. This is especially the case with micro-payments per word, per image, or per status update (cf. Cohen, 2016). Fixed prices can contribute to the fetishization of a cultural commodity by making it appear to clients as an independent “thing” rather than an objectification of invested labor power, time, materials, skills, and so on. Already Marx called piece-wages “the most fruitful source of reductions of wages” (2011:391), which is visible today in how they have become the favored pricing model by platforms of the gig economy.

When setting their prices, interviewees that are paid in piece-rates often relate the fixed price to some kind of hourly figure, by doing an estimation beforehand of how long a commission might take to finish and what other costs the price must cover. However, this can be difficult to predict in advance:

Marie (blogger and copywriter/journalist): I try to estimate the scope in some way, where we [Marie and her client] together specify the number of words and number of pictures. Often, we agree on a fixed price, where I’ve tried to imagine how much time it might take so I earn about as much as I want per hour. Then it [the commission] might go quicker, and that’s positive for me. Or some commissions take much longer time than you expect, and that’s a loss for me.

While fixed rates are predictable, Marie’s reflection indicates that there is also an inherent risk to fixed prices, where the less flexible arrangement means that the price seldom corresponds well to the time it takes to carry out the commission — for good or for bad. Graphic designer Adam told me of one commission that took much longer than he expected due to a “fussy” client, where the fixed price meant that he practically gave away his work for free:

Adam: I’ve done quite some unpaid work, or close to unpaid if you count the hours and divide it with the money. On one project, I counted that “fuck, I only took 35 kronor per hour” (laughs). “For fuck’s sake, that was the last time — even if he’s nice and a friend”. I was happy with it [the product] and thought that it would look good

in the portfolio in the end. But he was really fussy [and asked me to make many changes], and when I counted, I was like, “Nooo, 35 kronor [per hour]!”. He got something really good, and I know that if an agency had done it, it would have cost 10 to 20 times more. And ... everything has its limits. Everyone has a breaking point.

Similarly to Adam, many interviewees express that the pay they receive often does not reflect the time and resources they actually put into the labor process. The time it takes to produce a cultural commodity cannot be reduced to the amount of time spent during the immediate act of production. Producing cultural works requires not only artistic and technological skills but also ideas, planning, and research. It might involve traveling between locations, establishing contacts, pitching and re-pitching ideas, coming up with ideas, and an arduous editing and re-editing process in the face of suggestions by clients. Determining how much time something takes is often not immediately apparent in advance and may involve much trial and error:

Alice [photographer and blogger]: It’s easy to get burned in the beginning and work for too little. And then you realize “this took way more time than I got paid for”. After a while, you learn how much time it takes to do things. Going through pictures, for instance, that also takes time. Maybe you don’t think about that in the beginning. “Oh, I get 1000 kronor for taking photos for five minutes, that’s great!” Yeah, but it’s also work to travel to a location and [then] travel home and upload the images, choose images, wait for the selection, edit... that’s not five minutes work — that’s a day’s work. And then a 1000 kronor invoice is not so much (laughs).

Alice points out that traveling to locations (which often costs money) and choosing and editing images are essential aspects of her work that are concealed when she is paid directly for one or a number of photographs. Marcus makes a similar point:

Daniel: Is it difficult to know how much to charge and to come to an agreement with clients?

Marcus [photographer, filmmaker]: Yeah. It’s a hot topic. In the beginning, it was really difficult, because I always thought that I wasn’t worth very much. But the more commissions you get, the more you realize there are many things to consider with the price. You could always take more than what you are doing. Especially smaller customers might not have a big budget, and maybe they think “he’ll only take a few pictures anyway”. But then it takes hours to edit [the photos]. And I need a pension and stuff like that, which maybe they haven’t considered. And I have to pay off the costs for the equipment. So, it’s easy to scare customers with the price, but at the same time, you shouldn’t take too little. You must feel that your time is worth it.

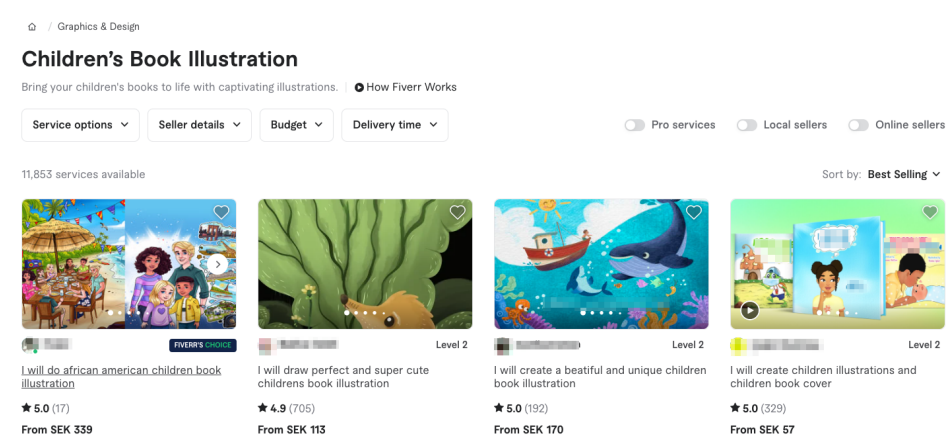
Marcus emphasizes that the price should not only cover the costs of the commodity. Freelancers also need to put away money for reproductive costs, social expenses, periods without income, and overhead costs for equipment, tools, and travel expenses. At the absolute minimum, freelancers must have a place to work, a computer, a cellphone, and an internet connection; however, they also often need editing software, cameras, tablets, microphones, printers, personal websites,

memberships for digital networking platforms and communities, materials, means of travel, and invoicing software, which all are things they must finance themselves. Since freelancers in Sweden get no occupational pension paid by employers, they furthermore should set aside extra money if they want decent pensions when they grow old, which they may not afford if they earn little money. These costs can put financial pressure on freelancers’ household economy (Pulignano & Morgan, 2022).

## Paid in ratings: Price-dumping on labor platforms

Much of what has been discussed above about negotiating freelance contracts and fees is not solely reserved for digital freelancers but also applies to freelancers and solo self-employed workers who are not reliant on platforms for their work. However, global labor platforms like Upwork and Fiverr, that were briefly introduced in chapter 5, intensify several of the challenges that freelancers face to get fairly compensated in an age of platforms, while also adding new unpaid tasks.

Fiverr and Upwork have slightly different systems for how they match buyers and sellers and for how they set freelancer fees. Fiverr has a system where freelancers post different “gigs”, where they set their own prices for particular services. Clients can then choose whether to hire them or not. Gigs are posted in different categories, such as logo design, fonts & typography, website design, or (as below) children’s book illustrations:



**Figure 6.1:** The grid interface on Fiverr, where different freelancers market their services (2023).

Gigs on Fiverr are often priced very low, with the person to the right starting from only 57 Swedish kronor for illustrations and book covers. Offering low prices is a key factor for gaining a competitive advantage on these platforms, which makes

price dumping common (Pulignano & Marà, 2021). In a Swedish context, this makes it difficult for freelancers to compete, as such low prices can barely cover living costs and expenses.

While Upwork more recently has added a feature called Project Catalogue where buyers can browse a catalog of gigs, similar to Fiverr, their primary model for assignments is that buyers post a “job” where they look for particular skills. Freelancers then place bids on the jobs, and the buyer decides who they want to hire, based on prices, ratings, portfolio, and the reputation of the freelancer (Popiel, 2017). Gigs on Upwork can be compensated per hour or by offering a fixed price. While hourly prices might offer freelancers a pay level that better corresponds to their actual working time, it also gives clients and Upwork more control over the labor process: When working on hourly contracts, freelancers have to use Upwork’s internal app for creating a “work diary”, which automatically takes screenshots of the freelancers’ screen six times an hour (every ten minutes form a billable “segment”). In addition, it records the number of mouse clicks, scroll actions, and keystrokes within each segment, as well as manually uploading time logs, which constitute the basis for compensation that freelancers submit to their clients. If they spend more hours than what the client has budgeted for, they are not compensated for them (Upwork, n.d.):

The memo bars in the Work Diary are color-coded to indicate the status of that billing segment. Their color-coding goes as follows:

- **Green:** Auto-tracked time, billable on hourly contracts
- **Yellow:** Manual time, billable on hourly contracts
- **Red:** Time over the weekly limit agreed with your client, not billable

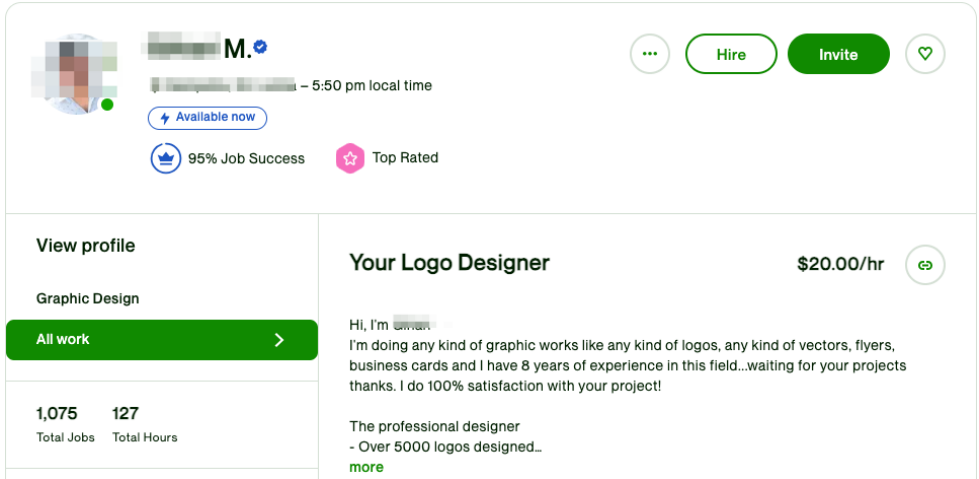
The row of green blocks is the Activity Meter. It shows the number of minutes out of a 10-minute billing segment that had activity (mouse clicks, scroll actions, and keystrokes.)

**Figure 6.2:** Upwork describing how the work diary is used.

While brand recognition and reputation are crucial for freelancers’ bargaining power (Gandini, 2016; cf. Wood et al., 2019), platforms like Fiverr and Upwork have their own algorithmic reputation systems that determine who become visible and hireable. As we saw in chapter 5, in relation to the discussions on circumvention, these platforms govern freelancers through lock-in technologies that make freelancers dependent on their internal reputation. The sellers that are featured and highlighted on the front pages of Fiverr and Upwork (which greatly enhances their chances for visibility and employability) is strictly determined by the internal reputation algorithm, which weighs in factors like ratings from previous clients, response rates, and number of previous commissions (Pulignano & Marà, 2021). These reputation systems create uncertainties and information asymmetries for

freelancers. Nonetheless, good ratings in themselves become a form of payment on these platforms. Illustrator and content creator Elinor told me about her experience with Fiverr: “You become so dependent on the ratings customers give you. If you don’t get all five stars, you’re fucked basically. The algorithm won’t promote you”. It thus becomes essential to secure positive ratings from clients in order to build reputation and to not lose future income opportunities.

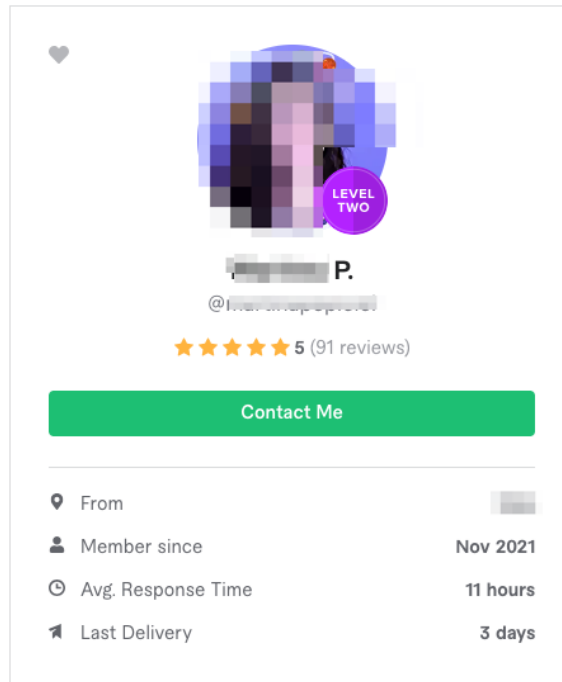
As we see in the left picture in Figure 6.3 below, Upwork’s reputation system algorithmically measures a “job success” score, which “combines metrics on their clients’ public and private feedback, long-term client relationships, client rehires, and contracts that don’t result in work delivered” (Upwork, n.d.). Based on performance, Upwork awards different badges to freelancers — Rising Talent, Top-Rated, Top-Rated Plus, Expert-Vetted Talent — that come with certain perks and benefits. These are awarded on criteria such as job success, having multiple clients, earnings history, continuously updating one’s profile, and more (Upwork, n.d.).



**Figure 6.3:** A freelancer profile from Upwork (2023). Right, a freelancer profile from Fiverr (2023).

Fiverr (figure 6.4 on the next page) rate freelancers with a five-star system with decimals. They award sellers different “levels” — New Seller, Level 1, Level 2, Level 2, Top Rated Seller — on criteria such as activity, number of completed orders, earnings, maintaining a 4.7 star rating over time, having a certain response rate and delivery-on-time rate, and similar (Fiverr, n.d.). Previous research (e.g., Sutherland et al., 2020; Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2021) shows that pursuing better rankings — which can be essential for getting hired — pushes freelancers toward over-performing and doing as many short and cheap gigs as possible, as this tends to cater to what the rating algorithms prioritize. Good ratings in themselves become a form of capital that freelancers are awarded, which displaces older forms of human capital-investments such as educational merits (McKenzie, 2022).





**Figure 6.4:** A freelancer profile from Fiverr (2023).

Awarding sellers “levels” explicitly alludes to games, and indeed, the form of self-governing which both Fiverr and Upwork encourage can be seen as a technology of “gamification”, where scores and awards are distributed based on performance and continued engagement (Purcell & Brook, 2022). Such platform technologies “transform cultural workers into entrepreneurs”; as Matthews and Rouzé (2019:68) write, they promote platform entrepreneurialism by orienting cultural producers toward the market and encouraging the rationalization of culture into bit-pieced commodities that can be measured and compared. At the same time, technologies of gamification also blur boundaries between work and play by turning competitive economic action into something “fun” and attractive.

When setting prices on Fiverr and Upwork, freelancers can — similar to the pricing model with several alternatives described by Erik in the last section — offer clients different “packages” within different price ranges (see Figure 6.5), corresponding to different quality standards, offers, and deadlines. Given that low prices are a key competitive advantage on these global platforms, this can be a way to attract clients by offering them different options. We see how clients can choose to pay more if they, for instance, want a product of higher quality, if they want access to the source file, permission to request more revisions, or a faster delivery time:

### Compare Packages

Package	SEK 207 <b>Basic</b>  SIMPLE  I will design Simple poster design with photo editing and color correction , High res + print file	SEK 414 <b>Standard</b>  CREATIVE  i will Design Creative poster design with retouch and , manipulation work High res + print file	SEK 621 <b>Premium</b>  PROFESSIONAL  i will Design Very professional poster design with top level of design skills, Full res + print file
Photo Editing	✓	✓	✓
Social Media Design	✓	✓	✓
Source File	✓	✓	✓
Print-Ready	✓	✓	✓
Revisions	3	5	6
Delivery Time	<input checked="" type="radio"/> 2 days <input type="radio"/> 1 day (+SEK 52)	<input checked="" type="radio"/> 3 days <input type="radio"/> 1 day (+SEK 104)	<input checked="" type="radio"/> 4 days <input type="radio"/> 1 day (+SEK 207)
	SEK 207 <b>Select</b>	SEK 414 <b>Select</b>	SEK 621 <b>Select</b>

**Figure 6.5:** Example of three different price packages on Fiverr that clients can choose from.

This type of fixed-price model does not take into consideration how long production *actually* takes, which creates a power asymmetry between buyers and sellers. Offering buyers more control in terms of revisions can, for instance, lead to a lot of extra work, as Lizabeth reflected:

Lizabeth (graphic designer): Especially if it's a customer who's new to ordering and who ask for a lot of changes. They might not understand that if I will add the double amount of text, then this layout which we agreed upon doesn't work anymore. Then I must create a new layout, and they don't understand I should be paid for that. But that's difficult to argue for [without risking a bad review].

Since digital freelancers on Fiverr and Upwork are dependent on customer ratings for their employability, they might have to accept unreasonable demands on revisions, beyond what was initially agreed on, to secure happy customers (see Mangan et al., 2023). They may thus be required to spend much more time on particular commissions than they are compensated for. This importance of securing good ratings intensifies what Gold and Mustafa (2013) call "client-colonization", by which freelancers may have to be ever-available to demanding clients.

In my material, it is common with statements from freelancers that labor platforms pay so little that it is impossible to make a living on them in Sweden, due to relatively high costs of living. However, by hosting large pools of global freelance labor, they allow Swedish clients to find cheap labor from other parts of the world. In my interview with illustrator and content creator Elinor, she argued that this creates a downward spiral of prices and increased competition also in Sweden: “It always makes it a struggle to negotiate your price with clients. Like, why should they hire me when they can find someone in India who works for a tenth of my price?”. Similar to this statement, when these platforms are criticized in my data, it is often through comparisons between freelancers in countries such as Sweden, with a comparatively high cost of living, and freelancers in other countries where both wages and living expenses are lower. Erik said about labor platforms:

[T]here are so many ... really many Indians on them who are underpaid. Eh ... it's like a market growing there, and they only get better and better. And Koreans too, I think. Ukrainians. Many good creators from the East. So, companies just outsource lots of stuff to them. It makes it impossible to compete.

In the public debate, labor platforms are often framed as disruptive forces. Yet, from my data, it is also clear that these platforms among Swedish freelancers are highly controversial and contested. Of my respondents, some have used these platforms at the start of their career or for occasional gigs as a supplement to other commissions. One interviewee told me that he uses them to “fish” clients, taking them outside the platform (in opposition to platform policy, as we saw in chapter 5). However, none of my interviewees use them as their primary or even secondary source of income, often pointing to the low pay rates and the intense competition. Instead, these platforms are, in my material, often framed as threats to the working conditions, pay, and autonomy for Swedish freelancers — a kind of moral “pollution” of freelance markets and as unfair competition, which means that Swedish freelancers suddenly have to compete not only with each other but also with freelancers from outside of Sweden who are able to work for much less money.

Linus (a graphic designer and illustrator) reflected that the real threat of gig platforms for the Swedish freelance community lies in the normalization of bad pay and price dumping. He argues that such platforms try to turn “free work into something which you are supposed to think is good”:

Linus: Of all the successful illustrators I know, no one uses gig platforms. They are a waste of time.

Daniel: Okay. But you mean that since they still are used to drive down prices in Sweden, and companies can use them to hire freelancers cheaply, they still affect your sector overall?

Linus: *Yes!* [upset voice] When I first found these platforms, people said it's only people from India and China and other poor countries that use them. But then I found out that people in Western Europe and the United States also use them and dump

prices! I saw a woman in Florida who made great presentations on Upwork and Fiverr. She sold book covers to publishers for 50 dollars!

Daniel: 50 dollars? That's nothing.

Linus: It's sick. You should know that when I make a cheap book cover, I take 10 000 kronor plus tax. And here she comes and takes 500 fucking kronor, tax included! I mean, what can I do? (laughs) I can't compete with that. I think we must criticize these platforms really hard, because these things trickle down. If we get used to lowered wages, it will affect ordinary jobs as well. We start accepting that wages should be lowered, lowered, lowered.

Linus begins by pointing out how he perceives labor platforms to be a "waste of time" because of bad compensation. He then goes on to formulate a slightly more structural critique, by pointing to their "trickle down" effects in dumping prices internationally. Even though he can opt out of using them himself, as long as he can find clients elsewhere, they allow Swedish employers to buy cheap labor power from other parts of the world, further discouraging them to employ workers. In this sense, these platforms can exert a downward pressure also on the wages of Swedish freelancers, Linus reasoned, making people accept that "wages should be lowered, lowered, lowered" while reducing the bargaining power of Swedish freelancers.

## Paid in experience: Contacts and human capital

Besides the constant difficulties to demand fair pay for their work, many digital freelancers also have experiences of doing commissions without any pay at all. While unpaid labor is far from restricted to the beginning of digital freelance careers, it does, from my material, seem particularly normalized to work for free as a "rite of passage" (Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2020:12) to gain entrance to the market. This might entail doing commissions for free to build experience, resumés, and networks; working unpaid internships; or giving away work samples to clients — what in previous research has been termed "hope labor" (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013) and "aspirational labor" (Duffy, 2017) to refer to future-oriented modes of reasoning that legitimize and naturalize unpaid labor in the present.

Imagaries of hope labor are today readily reproduced on digital platforms. Numerous articles, blogs, and opinion pieces online present strategies (often contradictory) on how to think about or avoid working without compensation in the beginning of one's career, as well as present accounts from freelancers of their own experiences. Such accounts create a discursive environment where unpaid labor is given meaning and made sense of. One blog titled "Why creative freelancers should never work for free" warns that working for free devalues both oneself and the freelance community, signaling "that your skills and time have no financial value". It encourages freelancers to "*stand firm*. Remember that your skills have value, and

politely decline offers that don't compensate you fairly. Over time, this can help shift perceptions of both yourself and everyone else in the profession" (May, 2023).

Another Swedish freelancer writes on his blog that "freelancers should be paid for their productive time. Our labor is a product with value and we must have the opportunity to sustain our economy and everyday life. I don't think it's any more difficult than that"). In contrast, a blog on the labor platform Fiverr encourages new freelancers to work for free by thinking "of it as working for influence, instead of money. Not only will those you help appreciate it, you'll start to build a reputation for being genuinely helpful within your community" (Williams, 2020).

Although conflicting in their views, these types of accounts share an understanding of requests to work for free as an all-pervasive feature of digital freelance markets, which aspiring freelancers must navigate one way or another. Most interviewees also account for doing gigs with no or low pay in the beginning of their careers as an unavoidable, necessary, and even natural part of freelance careers. When I asked the filmmaker Patrik if he had worked for free, he plainly stated, as if obvious, that "yes, I mean that's part of it". Graphic designer Adam similarly exclaimed "Yes! (Laughs). The short answer is 'yes', especially in the beginning" before adding that "it is pretty common for everyone in this sector as I have understood it, especially for those who are new". He went on to reason that

Adam: If you're new, you must start somewhere. Just take a commission. You know you're underpaid, but just do a website for a company [...] so that people can see that you are serious and that a company has hired you [...]. If you're lucky, you might after that find a serious company that is willing to pay you. But no one will pay you more than what you ask for, and that's also difficult.

Adam frames un(der)paid commissions as an undesirable but unavoidable part of freelancing markets, saying "there are always people who do things cheaper. The question is if they do it as good? If someone does something cheaper and better, then you're stupid if you don't [hire] that person". Implied in this explanation is that clients pay for quality and experience, and that it's up to freelancers themselves to avoid being exploited by doing good work. I asked him if he then is okay with the fact that he was underpaid when he started out, to which he responded:

Adam: I try to see things realistically. Do I think it's good that newly examined enter the labor market and are underpaid? It's not fun or good in any way. But if we are realistic and think of how the world works... if you start from zero, independent of where you come from, you will be at the bottom of some ladder. Those that succeed in the long run are those that hang on and try to improve themselves. The best thing you can do is to be so fucking good that people can't turn a blind eye to you.

Adam had a quite characteristic matter-of-factness when he discussed the need to do uncompensated work in the beginning, saying he tries "to see things realistically". This mode of explanation is expressive of what Fisher (2009) calls

capitalist realism, an attitude conceiving the market logic of neoliberal capitalism as so pervasive that it almost impossible to picture any alternative to it. There is a temporal, market-logic to Adam's accounts that frames it as okay and necessary to work for free in the beginning due to the rewards it will hopefully bring in the future: Work in the beginning becomes a hopeful investment in the self that might bring fruit later (cf. Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). This way, Adam and others make their own unpaid work accountable, while still maintaining a critical distance where they can distinguish legitimate forms of unpaid work from illegitimate and exploitative ones.

Platforms have created new avenues for both finding and giving away unpaid labor. Labor platforms like Upwork and Fiverr give access to a global labor market, where selling one's services cheaply can be a way of gaining experience and building a resumé. Content creator and illustrator Elinor told me she did several very cheap jobs through Fiverr to gain experience. Social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook can also be used to market services cheaply. In one Facebook group, a graphic designer wrote "I'm looking to work for a new portfolio, does anyone want work done? I don't require any pay, I'm just looking for the experience. [...] I hope this post is allowed". As her last sentence implies, such posts are not without controversy in freelance communities. Some Facebook groups have explicit rules against price-dumping or offering or asking for unpaid labor. Sometimes these sorts of posts become a source of debate and contention, where some accuse the posters of price-dumping while others express the unfortunate necessity in some cases to work for free, illustrating that unpaid work is a heated and contested topic.

Photographer and filmmaker Marcus talked about how working for free can be controversial in freelance communities online, and hurt one's professional dignity:

Marcus: Eh ... I've tried to stand my ground and not work too much for free. Both because it's not good for the freelance landscape, and [other freelancers] do not like people that work for free. It directly gets infected in the Facebook groups for freelancers if someone says they'll do something for free. And eh ... I mean, I must be able to survive. I might have done some commissions completely for free in the beginning, but they were few.

Daniel: Mm. So, is it also about showing others that you are professional in a way, that you stand your ground? That you trust yourself and know the value of your work?

Marcus: Exactly. You're easily de-valued if you say you work for free. [...] So yeah, sure, you might lose a commission but you keep some of your professional dignity.

While the individual freelancer might experience a need to work for free when starting out, Marcus points out that this may be met by resistance and peer pressure from the larger freelance community online (cf. Moisander et al., 2018). As I have also observed, freelancers might discipline and surveil each other publicly in settings such as Facebook groups by encouraging, pressuring, or shaming each other to not devalue the market and the professional freelance status.

Where to draw the line between unpaid work that is justifiable and not is strongly contested in various support platforms where unpaid work is occasionally discussed, often giving rise to heated discussion. One exchange I observed in a Facebook group started with Rasmus bluntly writing that he wanted to hire someone for free:

I need quick help for free to change my website [to] make it look more professional. Thanks! I recently joined the group but haven't got any answers yet. Help?

Rasmus's request starts an interesting conversation. Lisa says, "I think you should try to find a student who can do it [in exchange] for experience. Everyone in this group works in the industry and needs and deserves an income for their work". Mathias agrees, adding that asking for unpaid work can create a bad atmosphere in the groups. Another user, Frank, then asks, "Why should a student work for free?" His comment gets a couple of likes. Mathias replies that students might like to do it "for getting reference jobs and experience" to help them enter the labor market. Frank retorts: "The double standards of people who do not want to work for free themselves but still think it's okay to hire people without paying them", adding a passive-aggressive happy smiley. Lisa replies again, saying she has no double standards at all, and that she did some unpaid work when she was a student, which was good practice for entering working life and helped her find paid work later.

In the paraphrased discussion, we see how questions of when it is okay to work for free or which workers "deserve" to be paid for their labor are contested, challenged, and entangled in complex webs of negotiations. Professional freelancers are, by Lisa and Mathias, distinguished from student workers — the latter not being categorized as "real" labor (cf. Kallos, 2024). Frank critiques this assumption by questioning why it is ever okay to hire anyone without paying them.

What can be experienced as a need to do unpaid work in the beginning creates structural barriers to the cultural industries, which reinforces inequality. Previous research has identified gendered dimensions to unpaid cultural labor, both because it might be more prevalent in women-dominant sectors and because women may be more expected or prone to accept unpaid commissions (Shade & Jacobson, 2015; Duffy, 2017). Furthermore, working for free might not be possible for many who have to sustain themselves financially on their cultural work. Those not balancing their creative career with a day job might require the kind of support that comes from being in a wealthy family or having an earning partner, which creates class-based barriers for entry (Hesmondhalgh, 2010:279).

Working for free in the beginning is sometimes also accounted for as a way of gaining valuable contacts and building a professional network. Illustrator Erik said that building a network is essential for eventually getting paid, and that unpaid work can be an investment in business contacts: "You can be an incredible creator, but if you don't have contacts, you have a long way to go. Sadly, I think that's the most crucial part". Graphic designer John accounts for how the value of commissions need not only be monetary and that there can be "different reasons" for doing

underpaid jobs, such as being able to show that he has worked for particular clients. In the best case, he argued, this may lead to future business relations:

John: It's something I have learnt the hard way. When I started, I was very focused on the job and making good end-products. But now it feels like it is at least as important to keep a good dialogue the whole time, and that the client knows what they get. I have really understood how important building relationships is for the process.

Gaining valuable acquaintances and keeping good business relations illustrate the importance of social soft skills and other immaterial competences for digital freelancers (Lazzarato, 1996). Baym (2015) refers to this particular form of immaterial labor as “relational labor”, describing the effort that goes into creating and maintaining professional relations and connections. Judging from my data, this labor can be extensive, especially in the beginning of a career; It may require much time and effort outside of commissioned hours, thereby dissolving clear boundaries between personal and professional relationships. Platforms further increase this relational labor by complementing location-based networks with digital ones.

Unpaid internships were becoming increasingly normalized even before the platform economy, but today, the extraction of value from the unpaid labor of interns is an institutionalized practice within many cultural sectors (Shade & Jacobson, 2015). This is expressive of a trend where young workers or student-workers are drawn upon as cheap labor, taking costs and responsibilities upon themselves to gain experience and build resumés (Kallos, forthcoming; Maury, 2020). In Sweden, it is common for universities to offer internship courses, that can be financed with student loans. While this makes interns less dependent on wealthy families, it means that student debt is fueled by taking on uncompensated work with uncertain future prospects, producing indebted subjects (cf. Lazzarato, 2012). Internships can give aspiring freelancers experience and contacts, but there is often no guarantee that they will lead to paid work afterwards. Filmmaker Patrik told me he had much experience of seeing how internships are misused as a business model:

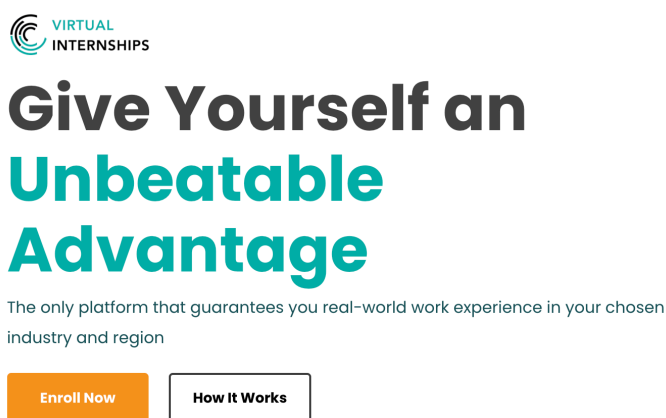
Patrik: There are companies within the cultural industries that almost have that as their business model, to have interns do unpaid work for them. At the same time, it is a kind of apprenticeship industry, so it's difficult where to draw the line. The best thing is of course if those companies can offer [employment] afterwards that can generate income.

Patrik negotiates the boundary between when he thinks internships are legitimate or not. On one hand, he seemed sympathetic to a crafts-based ideal of cultural labor, where interns can “learn the ropes” from more experienced workers. Such modes of reasoning can legitimate unpaid work as worthwhile, despite the lack of monetary compensation (cf. Mackenzie & McKinley, 2020:8). On the other hand, he expressed concerns about how unpaid internships have become a normalized



business model by which corporations can extract value from interns without giving much back. Other studies have shown that unpaid internships often do not lead to paid employment afterwards and that they tend to reproduce both class-based and gendered forms of inequality (Shade & Jacobson, 2015; Baines et al., 2017).

Platforms offer ever-new possibilities of turning internships into a business model, which benefits both hiring companies and platform intermediaries. A platform like Virtual Internships, founded in 2018, for instance, matches students or other internship-seekers with companies in sectors like fashion and design, marketing, and media. On Instagram, the platform describes itself as “The ONLY platform to guarantee internships” from 250 000+ work opportunities with clients from all over the world. Their website describes virtual internships as an “unbeatable advantage”:



**Figure 6.6:** Screenshot from Virtual Internship’s website (2023).

Companies hiring interns do not have to pay any fees to use the platform, and it is up to them whether they want to compensate their interns or not. Enrolled interns are not guaranteed a paid internship. The platform writes that they offer the “chance to gain professional skills, work closely with company leaders, and gain exposure through international experience” on a flexible, remote basis but also state that “while many students seek paid internships, the reality is that only around 15% of college students have access to such opportunities” (Virtual Internships, n.d.). While they have collaborations with some universities, those who are not enrolled at one of their partner universities have to pay the platform for their internship program. The platform does not list any prices publicly, but when trying to sign up, I was told it would cost me a total of \$1495 in acceptance and internship fees. Through such business models, unpaid work is promoted as something to pay large sums of money for, as investments in one’s human capital (cf. Lazzarato, 2009).

Internships can also be valuable to companies by allowing rights grabs, where use rights are transferred to the company. Photographer Susanne tells of how she, during

her internship at a news agency, took a series of photographs, and one in particular went viral. The photo has since been republished in many different mediums by the agency, spread over the internet and social media, been printed and sold on postcards and merch in many thousand copies, and been exhibited at museums outside of Sweden. Susanne has however not been compensated for it:

Susanne: You'd think I should have received some compensation from [the agency] after all of these hundreds of publications. But I don't, since I had my internship there. They are very happy to have earned money on it, I guess.

Susanne expresses frustration that the company did not compensate her for their use of her image and that, despite her hopes, the internship did not lead to any paid employment afterwards. Yet, she does not account for the internship as regrettable or wasted. Instead, she attaches meaning to the experience by describing it as a good way to develop her reputation: "That hasn't been very funny (laughs). But the way I think ... at least I got my name out. That's important. As I said, I wouldn't have been interviewed by [a large international magazine] if that picture didn't exist." While she was not economically compensated, she argued that the popularity of the photograph has led to exposure for her, which can be especially valuable in digital labor markets.

## Paid in exposure: Portfolio work and visibility

Vague promises of exposure notoriously fuel unpaid work in the cultural industries. While cultural workers long and often have criticized the exploitative nature of shameless offers from media corporations to work for no compensation other than "getting one's name out" (Cohen, 2016), the dilemma is that getting exposure to build networks and gain brand recognition can be important for finding paid work later. These tensions are reflected in a blog on Medium.com, where a freelance journalist writes revealingly about the difficulties of supporting herself:

I have an impressive resume, from some angles. People tell me it's the resume of someone who picks and chooses for success, a stack of interesting stories for national outlets with good reputations. I see it as a list of struggles, of hustles, of all-nighters and four-month-overdue paychecks, of \$20 an hour work done for \$4, of an unreasonable and naive optimism.

But each new published piece is a chance that a hiring editor might see my work, reach out, offer something. It keeps me chasing \$4 an hour assignments. I'm terrified that if I don't publish an article one week, I might be forgotten altogether, losing out on the hypothetical opportunities I've been working toward for the better part of these last eight years (Cagle, 2014).

This account shows how pressures to do underpaid work for visibility and exposure becomes a dynamic process with its own force, that pushes this freelancer to continue the “hustle” of badly paid gigs despite realizing that it is exploitative. “Each new published piece” comes with hopes of better work opportunities further ahead, and of being seen and discovered by new clients. She details being “terrified” of being forgotten and of losing the foundation for her career, which she has painstakingly built over almost a decade. Slowing down or opting out is thus not an alternative, since it would mean quickly being out of the game (cf. Lorey, 2011:87). Governing the self by keeping up appearances and staying active becomes important for sustaining business relationships and, hopefully, making new ones.

Whether to work for exposure or not is a much-talked about topic online, in blogs, on social media, and in various articles on freelancing. In one interaction I observed on Instagram, Sam, a freelancing illustrator, animator and graphic designer with close to 20 000 followers, asked his followers to tell him about the most shameful offers they ever received (Fig. 6.7).

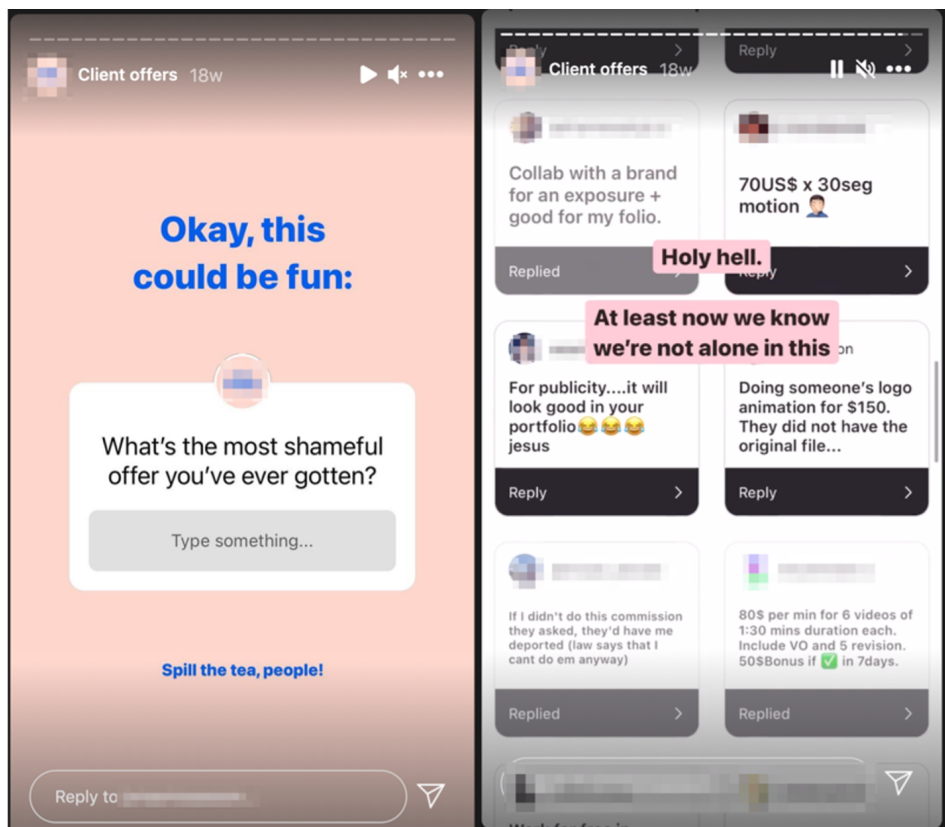


Figure 6.7. Screenshots from Instagram.

Many followers responded, and in an Instagram Stories highlight, Sam shares some of their answers.<sup>12</sup> The responses are often humorous but also express a collective anger and resignation over exploitative working conditions. The replies on worst offers include:

50 \$ for a 4 minute cel animated music video.

3 illustrations for a cheeseburger meal, without booze.

5 \$ for about 15s animated video. Client: a bank.

200 \$ a month full time 6 days a week with the possibility to work on Sunday.

Someone offered to pay me in nudes.

After going through a number of replies, Sam focuses on what he calls every freelancer's "favorite" — exposure. He lists several more responses:

From Eurovision, to collaborate on music video for free/having my name in the credits for 4s exposure.

Design full logo/branding for a luxury jewelry brand for exposure.

Free publicity from a 13 year old aspiring rapper with 58 followers.

30sec 2d animation for exposure on their website and one of their products.

Sam goes through several responses by his followers before he in the last image concludes "Holy hell. At least now we know we're not alone in this". Individual experiences of being asked to work for nothing but exposure or sponsored products are shown to be part of wider systematic patterns where the need to get one's name out in the platform economy is exploited by everyone from 13-year-old rappers to big banks and the organizers of the Eurovision Song Contest.

While it is easy to critique and ironize about requests to work for exposure and publicity in an age of social media, as Sam and his followers do above, my material simultaneously suggests that digital freelancers cannot always afford to ignore such calls. Platformization especially has changed the importance of exposure. In the digital attention economy, where professional cultural producers compete with large reserve armies of amateur creators online, "getting one's name out" means something altogether different than it did in times dominated by legacy media. Working for exposure has, as a result, become an even more present technology of

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<sup>12</sup> Instagram Stories are images or videos which appear at the top of the Instagram app rather than in one's feed, which normally disappear after 24 hours. If highlighted, they stay at the top of the poster's profile until removed.

the self (Foucault, 1988a), by which subjects must govern themselves in ways that enhance their visibility on various platforms to attract attention.

While lofty promises of exposure are used by companies to legitimize underpaid work, exposure and visibility can, in a reputational and algorithm-driven platform economy, also be a valuable currency that enables subjective self-valorization (Celis Bueno, 2017). “That’s how I grow my business. If no one sees me on Instagram, I don’t exist, basically. If I can’t show that I’ve worked with cool companies in my posts, then who will hire me?”, said illustrator and content creator Elinor. She accounted for how the structural incentives to gain exposure produces tensions that can make it difficult to “opt out” of working for exposure and visibility completely.

This complicated dynamic was reflected on by other participants too. Graphic designer José said that “it’s tricky. Because I have gotten several gigs where a company is like, ‘Hey, we saw the collaboration you did with [company name] on Instagram, we would like to hire you too’. It’s great when that happens. But companies, you know, take advantage of that”. Another graphic designer, John, stated that he is not against doing un(der)paid commissions for well-known clients. “If it’s a famous company, it can be very valuable”, he reasoned, stating that being able to show that he has worked with high-profile clients might enhance his own online reputation and brand. John said that “it has definitely happened that I do commissions that I think are too cheap, but where [...] the clients name is good to have in my resumé. There can be different reasons for working for less money”.

One way to generate exposure, especially for freelancers in visual fields, has long been to build and maintain a portfolio with previous works. A creative portfolio can today include images, texts, photos, websites, logotypes, blog posts, film clips and more that showcase one’s creative skills and expertise. The portfolio is a key instrument for freelancers, to the extent that some have previously characterized freelancers as having “portfolio careers” or being “portfolio workers” (Fraser & Gold, 2016; Cohen, 2016:11). While building a portfolio may be necessary for sustaining a freelance career, this requires extensive work, both in terms of carrying out un(der)paid commissions to get work samples to show, and of curating, managing, and marketing one’s portfolio over different platforms. The platform portfolio is thus, I argue, an instrument that leads to a proliferation of unpaid labor, and that provides discursive resources and frames through which unpaid labor can be normalized and justified.

Not too long ago, the creative portfolio might have been a physical folder with prints that workers carried with them while knocking on the door of advertising agencies or newspaper offices. For digital freelancers today, portfolios take the shape of curated content uploaded on one’s website or blog, on social media sites like Instagram or Pinterest, or portfolio platforms. This indicates a shift in the use of the portfolio: Due to platformization, they have gone from being something the worker physically brings to a presumptive employer to a tool for being discovered online (cf. Gandini, 2016). The “contentification” of culture on platforms like Instagram, where the algorithm demands frequent updates and a continuous supply

of new content, encourages digital freelancers to “play the visibility game” (Cotter, 2019) by adding more content to their multi-platform portfolios (Scolere, 2019) while trying to understand how algorithmic modes of visibility function.

Clients know the value that a good digital portfolio holds for freelancers. Many interviewees expressed that they have been contacted with requests like “Can you do this job? We cannot pay you, but it will look good in your portfolio”. The portfolio is an instrument that can facilitate exploitation, as clients can use it to convince freelancers to work for free. Most interviewees agreed that building a digital portfolio is crucial for finding paid commissions and building a reputation. Designer Nils connected his portfolio to his personal brand and expressed that it is a crucial expression of his professional competence and credibility: “The thing is, you have to build a brand that is credible. If you don’t have that credibility and a portfolio with jobs ... I’m a designer, so I *need* that portfolio to show that I have the competence”. Building a portfolio was a motivating factor for which jobs he choose to do, as he saw this as a way of guarding against unemployment.

The digital portfolio tends to be platform-specific and curated with particular audiences in mind (Scolere, 2019). Given that cultural workers often have several portfolios over different platforms, it can be time-consuming maintaining them and keeping them up to date. Establishing a multi-platform portfolio requires lots of what Hair et al. (2022:1440) call “platform labor”, describing the “mastery of and engagement with multiple digital platforms”. Adding to this, what I call *portfolio work* — managing one’s portfolio and continuously updating it with new content — can be time and labor intensive. Graphic designer José told me that “I spend many hours every week just, you know, creating stuff for my blog and tweaking it so that it suits Instagram. Instagram demands a rapid pace, so there I mix it with smaller posts too. If you don’t watch out, it can become a full-time job of its own”.

Similar to José, several participants used at least a couple of different digital platforms for their portfolios, where they post slightly different types of content and tailor it to the “imagined audiences” (cf. Marwick & boyd, 2011) of the platform as well as the affordances of the platforms. Different sorts of content look more or less good on different platforms, and different algorithms might push or promote certain types of content. This requires that freelancers engage in time-intensive research and “algorithmic gossip” (Bishop, 2019) to find out what is required by particular platform affordances. Illustrator Elinor said,

It’s a lot of that. Just adapting images to suit both Instagram and Behance, maybe somewhere else too. It’s more work than most people realize. You can’t just upload the same image to both of them. They need to be in different sizes and ratios to look good. So, you have to keep that in mind [when creating], like, “Which platform would this image look good on?”.

As this account implies, platform apparatuses are not mere neutral vessels for hosting the output of cultural workers; They also affect *what* is produced by having creators adapt content to the affordances of the platforms. Photographer and content

creator Matt reflected that “often when I take photos for the portfolio, I imagine how they will look on Instagram. Like, ‘yeah, this will look good in the feed’. And I adapt what I create according to that. So, the platform steers my creativity in a way”.

Elinor expressed how the need to continuously supply content to her different portfolios in order to appease platform algorithms (more on this in chapter 7) was stressful and required her to spend much free time creating work samples she could upload to her portfolio. This is a kind of reproductive labor, or what Standing (2017) calls “work-for-labour”, which can be necessary for securing future commissions.

Some participants dreaded periods when they have no new works to post to their portfolios. When I asked illustrator Olof if he ever feels pressure due to not having enough work samples to post online, he told me about a recent longer project he did that did not generate any works for his portfolio and having feelings of “panic”:

Olof [illustrator]: That’s a good question. Yeah, it happens sometimes that I feel like, “Shit, I’ve nothing to upload”. And then it’s real feelings of panic. I worked with a client in Switzerland for a year, intensely, full-time. And after that period, I couldn’t show the images. I’m still not allowed to show them. Then I felt like, “Shit, I’ve got nothing to upload”. I’ve worked for a year on something that I cannot show. Then I had feelings of panic... it was last year, and I felt that I got *nothing at all* from it.

As he accounts for it, the fact that Olof was not able to use any of the works in his portfolio almost made the commission pointless. Even though the project was paid, he frames it as if he worked for a year but “got *nothing at all* from it”, almost as a penalty for taking on a long-term project rather than short gigs. This illustrates the complex interplay between different kinds of rewards and value in digital freelance work, where works for the portfolio, in this case, are seen as highly valuable for Olof’s future career; more so perhaps than fair monetary compensation.

Getting content for the portfolio can either be done through commissioned work (monetarily compensated or not) or during one’s “free time”. Several interviewees told me they started to intentionally create works for their portfolio already in high school. Others who are years into their creative careers still create works and mockups outside of paid work with the instrumental aim of improving their portfolio. Portfolio work often blurs the boundaries between work and leisure time by making everyday life productive (cf. Fleming, 2014a), orienting it towards future employment prospects. Olof said that when one has few paid jobs going, it might be better to spend time on creating work samples “on the side” and uploading them to Instagram than seeking gigs:

Olof: I have colleagues who get stuck ... they don’t have many clients, and then I usually tell them to create their own images instead [and upload them to their portfolio]. Because that’s almost better than seeking commissions. If you have [created] illustrations that a client wants, then you actually have work. But it’s like digging gold. You draw new pictures and upload them and ...

Daniel: So, you mean that it can be more effective to create and upload images and hope that someone discovers them rather than directly contacting potential clients—

Olof: Yes, it could be like that. Because some illustrators invent tasks for themselves. I know a really famous illustrator who started to paint one letter every day for half a year [which she uploaded to her Instagram], and then she became super famous. [...] But of course, you can fail with that as well. You might create all this bad stuff that no one wants, and then you have spent your days on that.

Building a portfolio outside of paid employment is framed by Olof as a way of creating jobs for oneself at a later point, pointing to portfolio work as a kind of future-oriented hope labor (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013) or entrepreneurial investment in oneself (Lazzarato, 2009). As we see, Olof is also aware of the risks of doing so — you might spend time creating “bad stuff that no one wants” without getting any pay or jobs for it. The specter of failure is the other side of hope labor. This is fueled by new platform-specific forms of precarity (Duffy et al., 2021), such as algorithmic modes of visibility that make it difficult to predict what kind of images a platform like Instagram will show and promote at any given time.

Other interviewees described producing mockups for their portfolio during evenings or free time, sometimes for several hours a day, to have new content to publish on a semi-regular basis. Most, however, expressed that works created for established clients are more valuable than mockups. This can motivate taking on badly paid or even uncompensated gigs to build a portfolio, even though this means giving away free labor. Adam (graphic designer) said that building a portfolio by taking on unpaid commissions is useful, since it lets “people see that you are serious and that a company has hired you”, especially if those companies are well known.

While some interviewees prefer to build their portfolio by working for well-known companies to enhance their professional brand, others value other ways of building a portfolio. Graphic designer Magnus started by expressing that he was open to work for free if he got something other than money out of it, such as a good piece of work to showcase in his portfolio or a “fun project”.

Magnus: I’m not supposed to work for free really. But I take half a day sometimes when I sit with projects I don’t get paid for, but where I get much in return because it becomes something nice for the portfolio, and it’s a fun project. Then it’s worth it, even if I don’t earn so much money. But then, my wife might have another opinion. “You need the money!” (laughs).

While he admitted that he is “not supposed to work for free” (largely in reference to his wife and family), Magnus had no principal objection against doing so if he could add good work samples to his portfolio in return or if the project was exciting. Magnus negotiates his unpaid portfolio work by moving between arguments for why he should not work for free (“My wife might have another opinion”) and why, in some cases, it is legitimate, necessary, and good (“but”...). As he later developed,



the crucial factor for him was whether the economic situation of his family would allow it, as well as what kind of client he would work for. He expressed reservations for giving away free work to commercial companies, preferring to do this for non-profit organizations instead. He told me about a recent gig:

Magnus: I got a job through Facebook that was entirely unpaid but that I thought was so exciting that it was worth it. It was for a non-profit organization, which I think is important. If it's a non-profit organization, then I could absolutely do it [work for free] sometimes. Not spend too much time on it, but you know. [...] then it's a win-win situation. I got something good out of it, although not in money, but for my portfolio. And I helped that non-profit organization go forward. Philanthropical spirit maybe (laugh).

Magnus accounts for unpaid labor done for non-profits as more legitimate and fairer, for the social value it provides to communities. While recognizing the need to expand his portfolio, working for non-profits rather than commercial companies can be seen as a form of resistance and counter-conduct against actors exploiting freelancers' need to build portfolios. While it still involves doing unpaid labor, it avoids the most apparent exploitative practices and instead is valorized by the social communities that Magnus wants to contribute to. This line of reasoning allows Magnus to engage in unpaid portfolio work while still maintaining his self-conception as a moral subject who does not devalue freelance markets.

Linus, an illustrator and graphic designer I interviewed, had a similar standpoint. He was strongly critical of businesses that do not pay freelancers for their work, which he framed as exploitative and detrimental to market conditions. At the same time, he recognized that unpaid work is often needed to build a professional portfolio. In our discussion of unpaid work, he started by exclaiming that one should "never work for free!" before quickly adding that his one exception was to work for non-profit aid organizations.

Linus: If you want to start working as an illustrator, you should think, "What can I do to build my portfolio with my honor intact without being exploited?". The thing is, corporations want to make money on your stuff. But if you do it [work for free] for a non-profit aid organization instead ... they want to help people. That's a difference. If you do that [unpaid] professional work for an aid organization, you will still get good stuff [for your portfolio] to show to companies so they might want to hire you later on when they notice that you're good. You see what I mean?

Similar to other respondents, Linus was self-reflexive, quickly pointing out that his comments may seem contradictory given his exclamation that one should never work for free: "Maybe that sounds wrong, [as] there are of course aid organizations that can afford to pay you as well. But what I want to say is that you can work for them [for free] to build your website and portfolio". While unpaid labor is pictured as a more or less unavoidable, Linus, similar to Magnus, makes a moral distinction

between doing unpaid work for non-profits with little economic resources and doing unpaid work for commercial companies. It is not the act of giving away work for free that *in itself* is framed as bad — on the contrary, under certain conditions, it can be a good thing for prioritizing other kinds of value than economic profit, such as supporting communities in need. Under the right circumstances, giving one's labor for free can be an expression of care and solidarity (cf. Alacovska, 2020).

While both Magnus and Linus express a preference to do unpaid work for non-profit organizations, they still adhere to the same instrumental logic as the other respondents, namely, of working for exposure and portfolio maintenance. With Arvidsson's (2014:122) notion, working for non-profits to build a portfolio is a kind of "ethical labour" involving "adapting oneself to the expectations of one's peers in order to become a virtuous individual in the eyes of the *polis* in which one operates". Just as collaborations with famous companies might contribute to one's professional brand, collaborations with aid organizations attaches certain symbolic values (socially conscious, ethical, etc.) to the self-brands and reputations of Linus and Magnus, which might potentially benefit their careers. This topic will be further explored in the following chapter on self-branding.

## Concluding remarks

This chapter has analyzed how digital freelancing is entangled with unpaid and underpaid labor. By focusing on how the participants give meaning to and negotiate unpaid labor, the chapter contributes novel perspectives on how such work is normalized and justified in Sweden. Their negotiations form a complex picture. They often deploy an ambivalent vocabulary filled with moral evaluations — of legitimate and illegitimate forms of unpaid work; of which employers it is fair to work for without pay and which employers just take advantage of freelancers; of freelancers who should work for free, and those who just ruin the market; and of unpaid labor as exploitative, necessary, or inevitable. Some have within minutes gone from condemning unpaid labor in one instance to defending some forms of it in the next.

I argue that digital freelancing is entangled with two distinct forms of unpaid labor. First, it normalizes doing unpaid gigs for clients. This is a distinctive form of exploitation, where value is extracted from freelancers who are not adequately compensated for their time and labor power. This may occur in a number of ways, for instance, through insidious piece-rate systems or with reference to non-monetary, future-oriented rewards in the form of experience, ratings, contacts, pieces for the portfolio, or exposure. This work is often legitimized with reference to hopes of securing paid employment in the future. Often it is not directly experienced as exploitative, but might rather be motivated as an investment in one's skills, reputation, portfolio, and self-brand, elements that take particular forms in

the platform economy. The chapter contributes knowledge on the various rationalities digital freelancers draw on to make this hope labor (cf. Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013) understandable.

Secondly, digital freelance careers require much unpaid informal labor during one's free time in order to find paid job opportunities. This work is not necessarily directly exploited, but it can involve employers outsourcing various costs and risks to freelancers. It also includes all the activities freelancers have to do in order to make themselves visible on platforms. As Pulignano and Morgan (2022:11) note, the platform economy makes individuals "engage in an increasing amount of unpaid labour to access precarious paid work". Working in the evening to produce content for the portfolio, managing platforms, writing business proposals without knowing if the client will even get back, developing and pitching ideas which might never materialize into paid work, sustaining digital networks, and so on, are examples of these activities that blurs the boundaries between work and free time and draws on everyday life for productive ends.

I argue that the normalization of unpaid labor is one rationality through which the self-precarization of digital freelancers operate. Pressures to work for free are translated into distinct forms of entrepreneurial subjectivation, by which, costs, responsibilities, and risks are shifted from companies to individuals. Whether digital freelancers are able to turn their "investments" in themselves and their human capital into compensated work or not, they deserve to be fairly compensated for their labor. Yet, the diffuse and often subtle ways through which digital freelance labor becomes valorizable in the social factory can make it difficult to separate what even defines work from free time. This will become even more visible in the next chapter, which explores the self-branding practices of digital freelancers — another instance of immaterial and largely uncompensated labor, where work is entangled with the performance and formation of subjectivity and affect.

# Chapter 7. Branded selves and algorithmic subjectivation

Linus: It's no problem if you mention my name. Then I'm historic! I have absolutely no problem being seen in your context. I'm no camera hog who needs to be seen all the time, but I'm not afraid to be seen either. It's nothing I desire, but I don't fear it [...] As an illustrator and as a freelancer, it's rather the case that you *must* be visible. That's a part of it.

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In the spring of 2021, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, I am Zoom-interviewing illustrator Linus from my provisional home office in Malmö. Linus sits in the kitchen of his Stockholm apartment where he often worked even before the pandemic. Before the interview, I had emailed him information about informed consent and anonymization. At the beginning of the interview, when I once again informed him that I would refer to him by a pseudonym, he immediately responded that he would be happy to use his real name. He reasoned that as a freelancer, you must take every chance to appear with your name in different contexts, even if it might seem uncomfortable. Even a research project appeared to Linus as a site for promoting himself, his opinions, and his name for exposure, which connects back to the discussions in chapter 6. At the time, I found it a bit curious why an illustrator, who I thought would prefer to speak through his images, was so eager to appear with his name in an academic dissertation with limited reach.

Linus' insistence on using his real name likely reflects a digital attention economy that valorizes affective performances, where the individual is her own company and where life itself "is a pitch" (Gill, 2011). In this context, the personal name becomes a currency, a human capital, and a source of potential reputation, value, and employability (Hearn, 2010; Gandini, 2016). The cultural attention economies pressure freelancers not only to commodify and commercialize the works they produce but also to think about themselves as products, and to orient their subjectivities, self-presentations, affects, and everyday lives toward the market and potential audiences, wherever they may appear.

The topic of self-branding has generated quite some interest among researchers interested in selfhood in a digital age. Self-branding has been theorized as a form of free labor (Hearn, 2010), studied in relation to discourses in management texts and literature (Whitmer, 2019), as well as researched in qualitative studies of the

practices of entrepreneurial workers (Vallas & Christin, 2018). Establishing a good reputation has been shown to be an important currency for freelancers and others (Gandini, 2016). Yet, connected to the insights from chapter 5 on patchworking, how cultural workers produce branded versions of themselves in an ever-shifting multi-platform environment has, with some notable exceptions (i.e., Scolere et al., 2018; Scolere, 2019; Hair et al., 2022), not been adequately explored.

This chapter sets out to answer how digital freelancers brand themselves in a multi-platform environment. Self-branding practices are not new in the cultural industries, but they are rapidly and constantly reconfigured in the context of the platform economy, where platform apparatuses and their ever-changing algorithms and lines of visibility regularly transform what is needed to succeed. With platforms, self-branding has become a ubiquitous, self-reproducing social process with its own dynamic, by which our performances and data-traces online, whether we actively manage them or not, contribute to the imaginaries' other form of us.

This chapter explores how platform apparatuses correspond with specific forms of subjectivation, through which digital freelancers constitute themselves as branded, "sellable" subjects. The reflexive production of a self-brand produces particular relations not only to clients and others but also to the self. I argue this is part of the precarization of the self that occurs on platforms, by which workers are required to subject more of themselves and their everyday lives to market relations. At the same time, developing a self-brand is also a strategy for coping with a precarious world of work and of creating a sense of agency in a context where one has limited control over workload and income. In neoliberal terms, the self-brand functions as an investment in the self (Foucault, 2008), which can be leveraged against employers to exert some agency.

In the following, I discuss four imperatives for digital self-branding practices and how these are negotiated: 1) you are your product 2), just be yourself 3) find your niche, and 4) engage your audience. These imperatives correspond to often contradictory ideals that address and instruct freelancers on how to act in order to produce a valorizable, branded subjectivity. In this, the ideals have real consequences in shaping actions and subjects. These imperatives correspond to what I argue are shared discursive understandings and imaginaries of self-branding. I interrogate these imperatives as technologies of the self (Foucault, 1980), which operate at the borderlands of subjection and subjectivation. Digital freelancers can draw on these imperatives as resources when they constitute their subjectivities and enact their self-branding practices, which is not to say that they uncritically adopt them or cannot resist them (Hansen Löfstrand & Jacobsson, 2022).

In the next section, I start by outlining my theoretical position on self-branding in relation to previous research. This position is then developed through the rest of the chapter, which engages more directly with my empirical material.

## You are your product: Commodity or asset?

Although self-branding discourses and practices have existed for a long time (see Whitmer, 2019), their popularization in modern business discourse can be traced to influential texts like *The Brand Called You* (1997) by management guru Tom Peters. There, he prophetically declared that today “we are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You”. Peters did not invent these ideas, but since then, self-branding as discourse and practice has become part of the neoliberal common-sense, celebrated and promoted by many, as evident from the enormous amount of management and self-help books on the topic. With the spread of social media platforms, self-branding has further penetrated the fabric of society, from Swedish schooling, to state-financed coaching for the unemployed, to the way different professions think and talk about themselves and their work (Gandini, 2016; Gershon, 2017; Vallas & Christin, 2018; Karlsson, 2019; Åström Rudberg, 2023a).

While self-branding has generated the attention of scholars interested in the intersections of subjectivity and the commercial logics of digital labor markets, the nature of the self-brand and its role in platform capitalism remains ambiguous. The step from talking about “the brand called you” to “the commodity called you” is not far, especially in an immaterial economy where we all are expected to sell branded images of ourselves (cf. Arvidsson, 2005). Several have therefore interpreted the expansion of self-branding on digital platforms as a far-reaching form of *commodification*: Yet another sign of what Harvey (2005:165) has called the neoliberal “commodification of everything”, where even individual personality and subjectivity become products to be sold (cf. Cotter, 2019). For instance, Marshall (2021:168) recently argued, with unmistakably moralistic undertones, that today social media celebrities express in “the most extreme form the commodification of the individual”. Drawing on Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts*, Marshall (2021:167p) frames commodification as

a form of alienation, one of the most destructive elements of capitalism as it reifies those cultural processes that define human relations and activities and allows those things/processes to be converted into systems of exchange that are no longer connected to the people who helped make their original value and meaning.

The understanding of self-branding as an alienating form of commodification seems to be far from the experiences of most of my participants. Certainly, several describe self-branding as annoying, challenging, frustrating, and anxiety-inducing. Some even directly frame it as alienating, as they discuss how constantly presenting a curated image of the self somehow makes them disconnected from the sense of who they “really” are. However, I do not think any of them would subscribe to the idea that these brands are thing-like objects they have no connection to or control over. On the contrary, the constant and continuous immaterial labor that is needed to

sustain a coherent self-brand over multiple platforms means that they risk becoming *too* personally attached to these processes. Building a self-brand encapsulates the whole ambivalence of free digital labor, famously described by Terranova (2004:74) as both “voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited”.

There is thus some conceptual confusion in the debates around self-branding. I argue that self-branding is not about turning the self to an actual commodity so much as it is a marketing strategy and self-technology where one reflexively has to *think* about and instrumentally relate to the self *as if* it were a commodity. This might seem like a slight semantic difference. These affective self-presentations are, after all, in a manner of speaking “sold” as part of one’s offer, and can become targets of valorization and enclosure from platforms or brands through a range of subsumptive practices. Yet, self-branding is different from the commodification described by Marxists like, for instance, Lukács, as a process where socially produced things are turned into reified objects valued only for their exchange value, with “an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people” (Lukács, 1971:83). On the contrary, even on the surface, the social relations between people are the very explicit foundation through which self-brands are valorized, as reflected on in not only critical social theory ranging from Naomi Klein’s *No Logo* (2001) to autonomist Marxism but also marketing literature, “algorithmic gossip” online (cf. Bishop, 2019), and the accounts of my participants.

From a less orthodox Marxist position than Marshall, Jarrett (2022a, 2022b) has recently argued that it makes little sense to understand the self-branding of digital laborers solely through the lens of commodification. She writes that self-branding does not turn subjectivity into a commodity over which ownership is transferred or which the creator ceases control over. On the contrary, self-branding practices are often meaningful and associated with a strong sense of self-control: The self-brand contains both use-value and exchange-value. Jarrett argues that the equation of self-branding with subjective commodification or alienation therefore is too simplistic. Instead, drawing on Feher (2018), she proposes that these activities function in accordance with a financial logic that turns “subjectivity and embodiment into *assets*; forms of (human) capital that can be deployed to secure investment” (Jarrett, 2022b:95; my emphasis). About assets, Jarrett (2022b:99p) writes that they are not exclusively “bought and consumed but invested in and speculated upon. [...] It is not a static object but is instead defined by an unfixed, performative, speculative logic that is always future oriented”. In accordance with the financial logic of platform capitalism, self-brands become valuable through future-oriented speculation rather than by generating profits in the present, according to Jarrett.

I think Jarrett raises important points for understanding how the brands of digital workers become valuable not only for clients and platforms but also for freelancers themselves. While various actors can co-opt and tap into these brands and extract value from them, this value can never be fully captured from the outside: Even during commercial transactions, it remains part of the worker’s assets which they

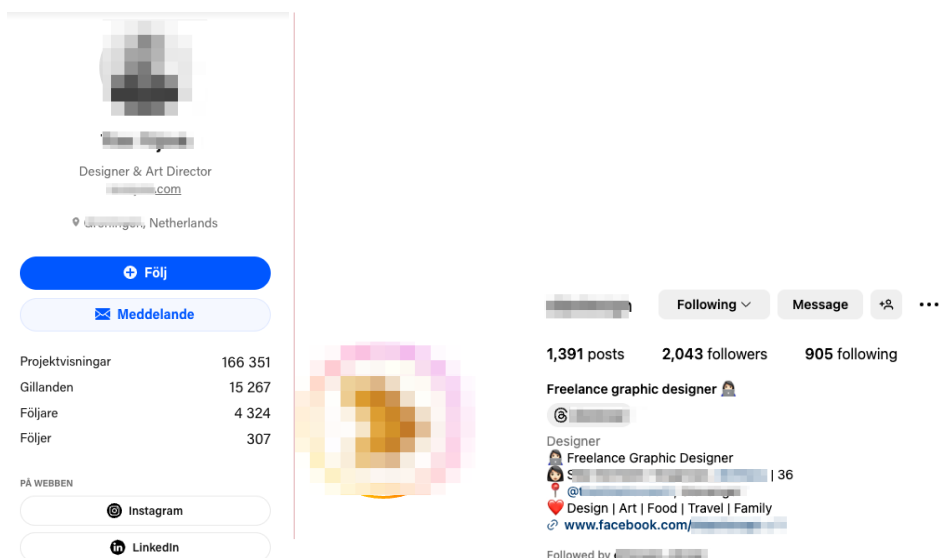
cannot be fully alienated from. As an asset, the self-brand can never “be entirely produced or captured by the enterprise that exploits it; the value of that asset is merely tapped into and channeled [...] and remains in important ways bound to the subjectivity of the worker”, as Jarrett (2022a:161) suggests.

This emphasis on investment and what Jarrett calls assetization as the ruling logics also ties well into what I showed in chapter 6: How digital freelancers engage a great deal of uncompensated work and hope labor in order to further their employability and reputation. Having a strong self-brand and reputation — today often measured through various platform metrics, such as likes, followers, ratings, or job success scores — is often seen as an investment “in oneself” that can attract the monetary investments of clients and customers, as well as the investment of attention and affect from followers, consumers, and others (Gandini, 2016). Through this, one’s subjectivity and private life arguably does not so much become commodities to sell but rather assets to draw on in order to secure investments in their self-performances from clients, followers, consumers, brands, and algorithms.

While the self-brand may not be best conceptualized as a typical commodity, the freelancers I interviewed nonetheless often reflect on themselves as products, which points to how their subjectivity is still shaped in accordance with a commodity logic. We saw elements of this in the previous chapter, where they discussed prices and evaluations of the value of their services. In my data, it is not uncommon with expressions like “You must know *your own value*”, “*You are the product* you’re selling”, “As a freelancer, *you are your brand*”, and that you have to “put a price on *yourself*”. Such statements point to a kind of objectification of their self, of viewing it from the eyes of an outside investor or customer. With Cremin’s (2010:137) concept, this functions as a form of “reflexive exploitation” by which the subject “reflects on herself as an object of exchange in order to access a wage and social status, to choose a life that is compatible with the injunctions of liberal capitalism”. While this does not imply that their subjectivity is sold as a commodity, it indicates that a commercial vocabulary shapes their way of thinking about and presenting themselves in relation to their work, and that their subjectivity or sense of self in turn becomes part of the imaginaries and immaterial values they offer clients.

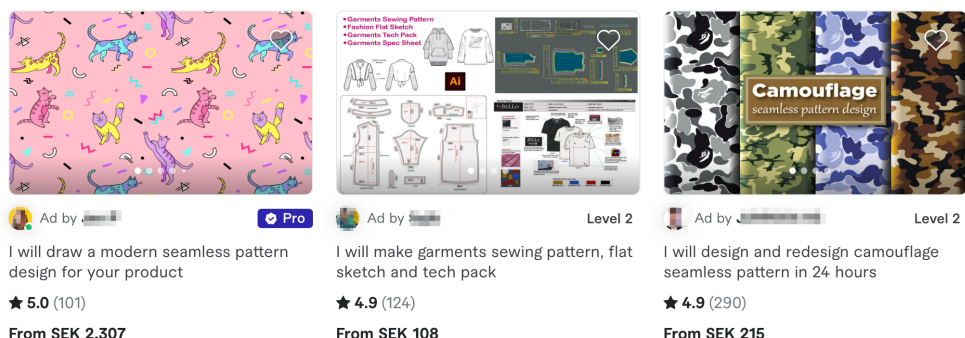
Thinking about the self as a marketable commodity or asset — which I argue works as technologies of the self and a way of relating to and forming one’s subjectivity — is also reinforced by how the affordances of platform apparatuses steer self-presentations and performances. In profile presentations and “about me” texts, platform apparatuses of different kinds tend to push for standardized forms of self-presentation which are short, punchy, and immediately classifiable. Whether we talk about a social media platform like Instagram or a portfolio platform like Behance, they connect the self-presentations of users to various metrics (likes, followers, posts, views, etc.) which work as objectifying quantifications of their reputation, popularity, or brand value, like in 7.1 below:





**Figure 7.1:** To the left, profile from Behance. To the right, Instagram profile of a copywriter.


While platform affordances give users a certain leeway to choose how to present themselves, they also set up boundaries for how this can be done, including what kind of information one can disclose about oneself or by having word limits for how much can be written in the profile. These structured forms of self-presentation, combined with the heavy emphasis on metrics, turn freelance subjects into measurable, comparable, exchangeable units, packaged as commodities, in which clients can decide whether they want to invest their time, attention, or money. This logic of “thinking about the self as a salable commodity” (Marwick, 2013:166) is even more heavily accentuated on a creative labor platform like Fiverr. As previously discussed, clients there browse a catalog of freelancers, lined up next to each other in a grid to make them easily comparable:



**Figure 7.2:** The catalog of freelancers from Fiverr.

The affordances of Fiverr demand all gigs to be presented in the form of “I will do X”. This can range from slightly broader declarations (“I will draw a modern seamless pattern design for your product”, above) to small and specific tasks (“I will submit your image to 15 photo sharing sites”). Promoting oneself and one’s skills is done within strictly standardized forms, shaped through various requests and demands of the platform (Davis, 2020:68). Through such affordances, technologies of subjection and technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988a) intersect: Freelancers are demanded to form their subjectivities in particular ways. The platform, for instance, steers freelancers through requests to present and identify themselves as on-demand piece-workers who do small gigs and tasks for often very low compensation. This is combined — as we saw in chapter 6 — with star ratings by clients and “levels” which determine their opportunities for visibility, which push freelancers toward adapting a competitive, active, enterprising subject position to succeed. On the profiles of specific freelancers, you can also see statistics on aspects like average response time, when they last delivered work, and the languages they speak. These categories also work to objectify and externalize their subjectivity by making it standardizable, evaluable, comparable and, ultimately, sellable:

### About the seller



@fiverr

★ 5 (697)

Top Rated

Contact me

From	Member since
Sweden	Mar 2015
Avg. response time	Last delivery
6 hours	1 week
Languages	
Swedish, Russian, English, Latvian	

Hi! I am an experienced book illustrator. Easy to communicate with, responsible and quick.

I speak English, Russian, Swedish and Latvian.

Looking forward to work on your project!

**Figure 7.3:** Seller profile from Fiverr.

We see how platform apparatuses and their affordances push workers to objectify themselves and to think about themselves and their social skills (above: “Easy to communicate with, responsible and quick”, language fluency) as if they were commodities. As we will see throughout this chapter, this creates tensions for how their branded subjectivities are formed in practice.

## Just be yourself: Calculated authenticity

One day when browsing through my Instagram feed, I stumble upon the professional profile of Sanna, a freelancing web and graphic designer. The biographical text on her profile reads similarly to innumerable other profiles that I have seen during my fieldwork:

I'm a digital creator and I'll help you find your unique style – Logotypes, color palettes and fonts 🌈 Do you want a graphic profile which stands out? Send me a dm [direct message].

I look through Sanna's posts, which include both images and video reels: The latter reportedly having become all the more important for creating engagement and gaining traction through the Instagram algorithm, in an attempt by the platform to compete with the popularity of TikTok (Saleem, 2023). Sanna's feed includes some designs and previously commissioned works, but I note that they constitute a rather small part for someone marketing herself as a graphic designer. What she advertises is not primarily her creative style or portfolio. Instead, her posts are mixes of informative video reels ("Five things you can do to improve your website"), or vacation selfies, serene pictures of nature, and inspirational portraits of her sitting by a desk with paintbrushes and a cup of coffee.

Marwick and boyd (2011) have used the concept of *context collapse* to describe how social media platforms collapse different audiences (clients, other creators, family, friends) into one and the same context, which makes it necessary for users to manage the expectations of different audiences. Marwick and boyd detail how Twitter users, for instance, might have multiple accounts, use pseudonyms, self-censor their content, and use privacy settings to handle the expectations from different "imagined audiences". Yet what is illustrating about Sanna's account is how professional and personal modes of self-presentation are not only combined but seem to float together almost seamlessly. Being a digital creator is often not presented so much as a profession but as a creative lifestyle. In one video reel, Sanna holds her baby and both look into the camera. The accompanying text details how she chose to end her employment to start her own company:

I wanted to work from home and be free to decide when to work and how much. Being able to decide over my time and work with something creative and fun. There and then, I started my journey to become a web designer and graphic designer. One pandemic and two children later, I'm now working in my own company with something I love. Something that I think is fun and that I love to help others with. I stepped out of the hamster wheel and continued forward, as I've always done.

The marketing of her professional skills and knowledge intersects with the narration of a kind of success story about herself in adapting the freelancer lifestyle ("I

stepped out of the hamster wheel and continued forward, as I've always done"). Combined with the image, the post seems to say that freelancing allows her to spend more time with her kids and family, a common narrative among female freelancers (Chung, 2022). It is difficult to pinpoint the intended audience for the narration; if it is directed to clients or produced as inspiration for other aspiring freelancers. Regardless, it serves to market not only her skills but also her lifestyle and family life as part of her offer, as a feminized form of entrepreneurial subjectivation. In the comment section, several other freelancers respond with comments such as "so relatable ❤️" and "I fully recognize myself in this, I'm so inspired by your journey! 🥰", engaging with the content of others and producing affective reactions of joy and positivity while also drawing attention to themselves (Abidin, 2016).

If the need to think about the self as a commodity pushes for a kind of objectification and standardization of the self, as we saw in the last section, there is a simultaneous imperative in today's culture to highlight the unique and authentic — that which is supposed to be the opposite of standardization. The infusion of personality, family life, and lifestyle in self-marketing to construct affective relations is well-documented in relation to influencers and social media content creators (Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2017; Cotter, 2019) but a bit more surprising in relation to cultural producers who do not draw explicitly on their own life for the commodities and services they produce. Yet, these discourses are strongly prevalent also in my data. In an inspirational article titled "Personality is the new marketing", published on the website of umbrella company Frilans Finans, two Swedish photographers detail how it has become all the more important in today's digital society to draw on one's personality as a resource when marketing oneself:

In today's digital society with social media always present, it's not always easy to stand out in the noise. To succeed, we must go outside of our comfort zone and dare to be different: We must do what no one else does. What is it that no one else does? What separates you from everyone else? The answer is simpler than you think: You are the difference! When we buy a service or product today, we'd like to know who's behind it. To create trust, inspiration, and recognition have become more important parts of your offer (Frilans Finans, n.d.).

"Trust, inspiration, and recognition" are framed as qualities that are established by being yourself and highlighting the person behind the product. Differentiation not only becomes important in relation to one's products (having a distinct creative style or specialized competence) but also in relation to one's subjectivity: *You* are the difference that will make your company and services stand out in the competition. Highlighting the person behind the product can be interpreted as a way of creating a sense of *authenticity*, which Poell et al. (2022:139) argue is a central mechanism for governing the relation between cultural producers and platforms. It is also a central imperative, I argue, through which freelance subjects are formed, being yet another technology of the self that is prominent when self-branding.

The contemporary obsession with authenticity is pretty curious in supposedly postmodern times of irony and pastiche, where essentialist notions of a “true” core self hardly are tenable anymore (see Fleming, 2009:24). Authenticity displays an especially curious dialectic in the context of self-branding and how it is shaped by platforms. These contexts require freelancers to present a self which *seems* authentic in the light of the “dominant scripts” of consumer capitalism (Hearn, 2010), by engaging in what Pooley (2010:72) has called “calculated self-promotion”. As Jarrett (2022b:98) suggests, “Authenticity here is not about revealing a ‘true’ self but about consistently performing a curated self that reflects the expectations of the audience”. What I think must be emphasized is thus that authenticity is not (now or ever) an individual static quality reflecting an inner “essence”, but a relational and social attribute which is formed in the interaction between freelance creators, the community or clients that consume their content, and particular platforms and their algorithms and user cultures. It can be calculated, yet seeming authentic.

What is experienced as authentic — and consequently, what is not — is shaped in social and cultural contexts. Norms for authenticity are not only determined between producers and consumers online but also by platforms apparatuses and their algorithms and features. Performing authenticity today requires freelancers to manage algorithms that control feeds and to adapt self-presentations to the user cultures of particular platforms. Seeming authentic on Instagram is not the same as doing so on TikTok or LinkedIn, which makes platform-specific self-branding (Scolere et al., 2019) — tailoring and calculating “authentic” self-performances to the expectations of particular communities — important.

It varies how digital freelancers reason about authenticity, to what extent they define it as something that can be calculated, and how much they think you should draw on life outside of work as a resource when self-marketing. Content creator and photographer Alice was one of my interviewees who most strongly objected to the idea that authenticity should or even could be calculated. Constructing a fake persona might alienate you from your “real” self, she argued, and further create all sorts of lies which might be difficult to get out of.

Alice: When you’re working in social media, then you *are* your brand. And to then try to strategize around it is a bit like painting yourself into a corner, because suddenly you don’t know what lies you’re saying (laughs). “Who am I?” I think that can be pretty ... if you work with this a lot, it can be pretty harmful for some, that suddenly you don’t know who you are anymore. “Am I this person that I’ve painted myself as?” So, it’s ... for me it’s been good to just be who I am. Because who would I otherwise be? (laugh). It becomes so strange.

Starting by stating that “you are your brand” as a content creator, Alice did not express any real contradiction between this and still genuinely being “who I am”. Her subjectivity rather appears as a resource or asset to naturally draw from even in professional settings, pointing to how immaterial labor makes labor and subjectivity formation coincide. Alice said that she does not do a lot of conscious strategizing

around what content to present to her followers, as this would make it less authentic and honest. She further reasoned that presenting a strongly curated self can be dangerous, as you might lose track of yourself and become alienated in the process. She referred to other content creators and influencers, saying “I’m probably more unique here than others who are more entrepreneur-ish than I am”, distancing herself from them and presenting herself as a more authentic creator than those who cynically create content and manufacture a subjective persona for profit.

Nevertheless, Alice did make conscious decisions about what types of content to post, how often, and which platforms to use for the most effective communication. While her blog was an important marketing channel, Instagram was the platform she used the most and where she also monetized her content through influencer collaborations. She argued that blogs today have lost some of their relevance and that “Instagram is more attractive if you want to create visibility”. According to Alice, the affordances of Instagram are better for having a continuous, genuine dialogue with her followers and sharing parts of both her professional and personal life to attract collaborators and clients:

Alice: I don’t have a blog that I update every day and where I have, like, thousands of readers every day. Which I have on Instagram. There, it’s more continuous updates which you can follow particularly in my Instagram Stories. So, I work a lot with that.

Daniel: Okay, so you try to post Instagram Stories every day? What do you post?

Alice: Yes, I do that daily, as long as I have interesting material. I don’t want to have a [feed] that is like, “Today I’m drinking coffee and eating a ham sandwich”. That’s so uninteresting. I always want people to take something away from what I share. But even if [I post] about me and my bonus-children playing with our bunnies or something ... maybe that’s not something the reader takes away much from. But it still contributes to the whole [image of me]. You can, like, be a creator and still be out on adventures, be a woman, and have children.

According to Arriagada and Ibañés (2020), Instagram works as a disciplinary apparatus that rewards continuous daily updates as a form of authentic communication. Instagram Stories in particular is a feature which allows users to post more spontaneous content that disappears from a user’s profile after 24 hours. Instagram describes Stories as allowing users to “share everyday moments and grow closer to the people and interests you care about” (Instagram, 2024). It is framed as a more immediate and genuine form of communication that can create affective bonds to one’s followers more easily. Alice reasoned that posting stories daily that might not seem directly relevant for her audience also contributes to her self-brand and to the image the reader forms of her as a person. Performing as a professional subject becomes intertwined with the performance of womanhood and motherhood, which points to a gendered form of communication. While she did not want to create a constructed persona for herself, we still see in the quote how she reflects on what

type of content belongs on her Instagram and what does not. She referred to this as her having some kind of “unconsciously conscious strategy” by which she determines which type of professional and personal content might be interesting for her followers. This speaks to how platform apparatuses like Instagram shape the behaviors and impulses of users toward specific modes of self-governing, even when this behavior might not be fully consciously articulated (cf. Barry, 2019).

Other informants more directly discussed authenticity as strategically performed and constructed. Nils, who works with design and branding, argued that the self-brand to a large extent is a constructed persona. Yet, he reasoned that in order for it to seem authentic, you have to draw on at least parts of your real subjectivity and interests to ensure the façade does not crack.

Nils: I think you must find something which differentiates you from the noise [Swe: *bruset*]. And I think you can only do that if you find something that feels genuine, or at least is experienced as genuine. It doesn't always have to *be* one hundred percent genuine, but you must find *something* I think. And the easiest thing is probably to find something that is close to you. If you start to make things up and create a persona that is very far from who you really are, then I think you're in deep water. It will crack sooner or later. Not to mention everyone who just follows the mainstream and posts the same things as everyone else. I think you can find followers like that, but I don't think it's very sustainable.

Daniel: No, so it's important to find something authentic that seems to be genuine?

Nils: Yeah, with emphasis on *seem to*. Because I, for instance, don't think a lot of successful influencers and YouTubers are genuine in the real sense of the word. They have found a persona that seems genuine, and they are good at sustaining it.

Nils directly reflects on the performative elements of self-branding online, namely, that the most important part is how you *seem*, not who you really are. Differentiating oneself from the noise therefore becomes important. Yet, he reasons that to do this successfully, you must at least partly draw upon “real” subjective resources, interests, and genuine personal qualities. Even if you do not express your whole personality, you should display bits of it rather than present a wholly constructed persona. If you do the latter, Nils reasons that there is a risk that cracks appear in the façade if you cannot really stand behind what you write.

In his own case, Nils told me that he draws on his interest in nature and sustainability when constructing his brand. He reasoned that, in times of greenwashing, when it is difficult to differentiate between the companies that are genuinely interested in questions of sustainability and those that just co-opt these questions for marketing purposes, presenting himself as genuinely engaged in these questions lends his brand a sense of authenticity. He actively drew on his own lifestyle of living in northern Sweden and spending much time in nature when posting content on Instagram in particular, arguing this creates trust for consumers:

Nils: I think it's also about seeming ... as we talked about, trust, that it's about seeming like someone who wants to do good things and who you can trust. [...] And that you have not only competence to do a job but also an intellectual and communicative competence. I think that's important. No one wants to hire someone who seems incompetent and slippery and sly.

Daniel: Right. So, both the image-building is important, but also those things about showing competence through your portfolio and stuff, like you mentioned before.

Nils: Yes, and that you show your competence too by how you express yourself. Because we can all quite easily tell if a person only talks or if a person actually knows what they are talking about. Many do that today. They lecture or talk on YouTube about things they don't know very well. But they can make it *seem* like they do, and that works for them. I think many influencers build their careers on that. They pretend a bit, but they do it convincingly. And [...] sometimes that's necessary. To sit down and do all your research before you say something, like in the academic world ... I don't know, that's not how social media works. I don't think there's time for that.

Nils highlights the importance of putting immaterial and communicative skills to work when constructing a brand and projecting an image of the professional self. As he accounts for it here, what you actually communicate becomes less important than showing mastery of the *act* of communication itself (cf. Virno, 2003:61): Clients might realize there is a degree of pretending in self-performances, but skills at pretending are in themselves valorizable. Yet, as we see, Nils often slides between emphasizing the importance of “seeming” to be an expert and of understanding this appearance as reflective of a reality. In a way, he seems to say, doing performances where you *seem* to know something is not so different from actually knowing it.

Some interviewees display a kind of “cynical distance” to their self-branding practices. Fleming and Spicer (2003:159) have, in other contexts, described this as a form of resistance against having one's subjectivity colonized by corporate logics, which allow subjects to dis-identify with a practice while still doing it. Graphic designer Adam reflected on the importance of getting clients to feel like they know him as a person: “It's a cornerstone in sales that I think is very important but that many persons miss”. He argued that many cultural workers “tend to be more introverted and... not think about those things so much”. Adam described himself as shy and introverted but said that he deals with this by retaining a distance to self-branding and approaching it as a “game” or “theater” where he performs for presumptive clients. These metaphors seem to allow Adam to retain some distance to the self-branding practices, as if he's not directly exposing his real self. At the same time, his reasoning below displays the complexity of this process:

Adam: In that way, it's like ... I did some theater when I was in school. And [...] I see this too more as a fun show where I present myself, like, I am this character who's supposed to take care of all your problems. For me, it's like a game — a fun game I'm playing. But at the same time, that game is *me*. It's real. But its ...



Daniel: Right. So, you both play a role and simultaneously have to express yourself in some way, like, who you really are. [Adam: Yes!] So you do not only create like a ... fake image of who you are. It's you, but ... some kind of performance of yourself? Do I understand you correctly?

Adam: Yes! Yes! Like this: I know who I am. But then, I also know everything I've learned about people and the world, and how I can [...] use that. Like, "people want this thing". I can be like that, so let's focus on that. Because I know that "in this sector, it's good". It's still *me*, but it becomes a little challenge ... how can I win this game.

As a sociologist, it is difficult not to think of Goffman's (1990) work on the presentation of self when reading this passage, where Adam himself utilizes a form of dramaturgical reasoning for how he works with his self-brand. Adam reasons around how he can manage the impressions of clients, to make them believe in the subjectivity he projects. Dualistic separations of a "real" from the "performed" self, or a sincere from a cynical performance (Goffman, 1990:10), is however not the most productive way of thinking about this process. We see how Adam explicitly highlights the performative elements of this process, while simultaneously drawing on his subjectivity as a resource or asset in ways which might convince clients to hire him. As a form of impression management (Goffman, 1990:132), this is activity that is relational and consciously directed toward an intended audience and how they might perceive him as a genuine, authentic person.

Later, walking me through how he presents himself on his website, Adam reflects on how he wants to shape and manage the impressions of potential clients:

Adam: When you go to my website, I want you to see immediately who I am. That it feels like it's a small step to contact me, that I'm only a call away. That's why the first text you see says directly what I do in a short sentence and that you can reach me any day on phone or email. I give my phone number directly. I write "I'm a whole advertising agency in one person. I do the same quality as a big bureau, because I've worked at those and I've had big customers. But you get it for a much better price, because I take care of everything." [...] So in two, three sentences, I tell in a nutshell everything about me. I have a picture of myself, so you see immediately who I am. Eh... and then, here's my number, here's my email, here's my Instagram. When you scroll down the website, I encourage again, "Hi again, call me if you wonder anything". It comes this little pop-up when you're scrolling. In other words, "I'm here. I'm close. You just have to call". Because [...] we like to know people before we approach them. And that's why you often ... that why you get hooked on people who have a personality. You feel you know who that is.

Adam details how he thinks it is important that clients get a sense of him both as a professional as a person, so that they almost feel that they know him and that he is perceived as approachable. In contrast to Alice's reasoning that "just being yourself" cannot be planned, Adam's account highlights the importance of reflexivity, in the

sense that the subject should engage in introspection and self-evaluation to calculate how to best present and package itself in a “sellable”, authentic manner (Wee & Brooks, 2010). Being an “advertising agency in one person” is here the branded persona Adam consciously projects, by staging himself as a multi-tasking enterprise in everything from how he writes about himself to how his website is designed. Yet, as Bröckling (2016:35) points out, self-branding is not “mere role play. You must actually become what you want to come across as”. If Adam could not also convincingly *act* as a one-man advertising agency, it would be exposed as a façade.

What Bandinelli and Arvidsson (2013:70) note in relation to the Changemaker movement — that in order to become a successful changemaker with an impact, you have to brand yourself as if you already are one — thus arguably also holds for the digital freelance economy. To convince clients, freelancers must *become* what they brand themselves to be. Several interviewees state that to create a believable, authentic brand, there must be a coherence between appearance and reality, and between what you say and what you do. Platforms become a testing ground and a stage for showing that you are the professional you present yourself as.

The need to appear as professional and knowledgeable even when starting out can create tensions in supportive online communities where freelancers seek help and advice from each other. Far from purely being a “back stage” in Goffman’s (1990) sense of the word, such platforms are also front stages for branded performances, where freelancers can discipline and train each other into appropriate behaviors. Things like asking for help in online communities can become signs that one is not competent enough or lacks qualifications. This is visible in the following interaction from a Facebook group where a content creator, Sofia, asked for advice:

Hey! Does anyone have tips on how to sell services rather than products on Instagram? Nice-looking products are easy but services are so difficult to package nicely on Instagram, I think. I have a company within copy and content but feel that Internet is flooded by tips and content everywhere and I don’t want to feel like an echo.

She got several replies, one of them from Zana who started her message with: “You’re helping companies with digital communication, but you don’t know how to do digital communication? 😏”. Zana followed this snarky remark up with “joking aside”, sort of neutralizing her own comment and then giving some concrete advice based on how she markets herself. Yet, her initial comment is interesting in a couple of ways. It points to the importance of showing through your own practices that you have the competences you sell. Working with communication and marketing without knowing how to market oneself becomes a red flag. Zana distinguishes herself as an expert who knows what she’s doing compared to less reliable creators.

The use of a half-condescending tone against other creators who are perceived as less professional or skilled in their marketing practices is visible also in my interview data. Talking about how she presents herself in online communities,

Matilda said she likes to take the viewpoint of a client by thinking about what they would like to see. She said, “You never know who’re looking at those sites. It can be big important clients too, so you need to think about what you write and how you package yourself at all times”. By critically assessing the self-presentation practices of other freelancers, she could distinguish what seems authentic from what does not:

Matilda: Maybe I’m harsh, but I’m a bit skeptical when I see persons who claim that they sell digital marketing or communication – and then they are not on LinkedIn, they are not on Facebook, there’s no work samples or portfolio anywhere, and no website. Then I wonder, of course, [if I were a buyer] what am I supposed to go on?

Matilda explained that, in her opinion, you must *show* clients that you have certain skills. Writing on Facebook or Instagram that you like to help clients with their social media presence without having a strong multi-platform presence yourself is understood as amateurish and unreliable, as there is no coherence between what you say and what you do. Matilda talked a lot about support platforms like Facebook groups or LinkedIn as forums where she can showcase herself as an authentic professional, by responding to the questions of other freelancers while referencing her own practices and experiences. While this is a way of contributing to the supportive commons of freelance communities (cf. Arvidsson, 2014:121), it is also — and importantly — a performative, instrumental practice by which she establishes a reputation in the community.

A common piece of advice in self-branding discourses online is to “educate” one’s audience by providing free content, advice, or tutorials. In a guide to self-branding for freelancers on Fiverr’s (2021) website, they write

Let’s say for example that you’re a freelance AR Developer and are seeking out new clients. A thought leadership article, ebook, or whitepaper which serves as a guide shows to your audience that you’re adept in knowledge and skill. Top points if you tailor content like this based around current trends such as AR filters on Instagram.

Producing content that can educate readers, as framed here, is a way to showcase that you know the ins and outs of your field of expertise and that you follow current trends. In line with this, a couple participants had, for instance, written books about digital work or entrepreneurship, which they marketed on their respective websites and social media platforms. Another common practice in my data is to offer free PDFs or newsletters with tips and advice on one’s website or social media, to provide valuable content to one’s audience while showcasing expertise. One interviewee reflected that she had created such a PDF “just to show that I know what I’m doing, and that I’m willing to share it with others, showing that I’m generous and stuff”. Providing free information and tips can thus in theory feed back into one’s brand by associating it with particular affective qualities. Photographer and social media manager Hanna told me that she uses her blog and Instagram as tools for education, which she described as a way of attracting clients too. She said that

Hanna: I always try to ... when I educate about something, then I also do it in my own channels. So there's coherence, so it's not like I'm teaching something but then I don't do it myself. Like, "she says it's like this, but then she does the opposite". That's why I don't write things like "you must post content four times a week", because then my followers expect that I do that too.

Daniel: Right. So, you try to have a coherence between what you say works and what you actually show to others?

Hanna: Exactly. And I mean, it has worked out fine for me, even though I don't post things every day. I don't believe in that either, it depends on your brand. Maybe that works for brands with a very broad audience. But more niched brands don't need that continuity in posting, I would say.

Hanna once again highlights coherence as important — following your own advice prevents cracks from appearing in the façade, which would present the brand as inauthentic. Hanna told me that she often does not know exactly how to do certain things herself, but by writing about them to her followers, she gets an opportunity to figure things out. "If I've read news about something, I try to communicate it creatively through my Instagram: 'Have you seen this? Have you tried this app?'" So I educate in that way too". As Hanna also mentions, what is required for a particular brand to appear coherent and authentic is also related to what particular niche one occupies in the market. I turn to this topic next.

## Find your "shtick": Platform nichification

Self-branding is not, I maintain, only oriented toward satisfying already existing needs that clients may have. It is also important for how it *produces* desire and the need for new services and commodities that feeds digital consumer capitalism. While digital freelancers govern themselves on the labor market vis-à-vis clients and others, I argue they also govern the desires of consumers and clients — they conduct their conduct (Foucault, 2008:186) — by shaping their desires and needs in particular ways (cf. Arvidsson, 2005:244). Self-branding, as a form of immaterial labor, creates not only commodities but "materializes needs, the imaginary, consumer tastes, and so forth, and these products in turn become powerful producers of needs, images, and tastes" (Lazzarato, 1996:138). Self-branding creates new opportunities for both work and consumption in digital capitalism, and mobilizes and directs the desire for new services and content.

In order to create consumer needs, to channel desire toward their services, to stand out in the competition, and to adapt to algorithms, it is common both in my interview data and internet material to point to the importance of a clearly defined *niche* for one's self-brand. Poell et al. (2022:140) write that platform-based cultural industries

are “driven by processes of nichification, defined as the *structuring of production by narrowly defined interest communities*”. The cultural industries have traditionally placed great value in “lowest common denominator” commodities that can appeal to as large an audience as possible. The ease and low cost by which cultural content can be produced, distributed, and marketized through digital platforms however arguably makes production for niched and specialized taste audiences more viable in the cultural industries after platformization.

In freelancer Facebook groups, where the issue of how to best market oneself is a reoccurring topic, having a clear niche is often discussed as important. In a post from a newly started freelancer asking for marketing advice, several others responded that it’s crucial to start by finding your niche.

Inez: Try to show that you are an expert within your niche by offering valuable content for your audience. Valuable content can be tips and tricks about your niche, what to think about, and so on. I think it’s a good mix if you mix educational content, inspirational content, and selling [Swe: *säljande*] content 😊

Anna: Market yourself to a niche and find your niche. You don’t always need a very particular target audience, but niching yourself is a good strategy for standing out. What problem are you solving with *your* website building, and how are you doing it differently / better than everybody else?

In posts such as these, developing a niche is described as a way of distinguishing oneself and one’s services from everyone else’s not only to compete with others but also to create a unique professional space that allows one to temporarily bypass competition altogether. Anna suggests that one way to develop a niche is to consider what specific problem you can solve with your services that no one else can solve. This ties into a particular entrepreneurial subjectivation, connected to the understanding of the entrepreneur as an innovator who *makes something new* that did not exist before (Bröckling, 2016:70). This goes back to Schumpeter’s (1947:151) understanding of the entrepreneur’s function as “simply the doing of new things or the doing of things that are already being done in a new way”.

As Inez explained earlier, establishing a niche can also be a way of claiming expertise within a particular field or subfield that becomes one’s own. This aligns with the meaning of a niche in ecological discourse, where it describes the position of a species within an ecosystem. An ecological niche is a relational term that describes not only how a species can persist and survive within an ecosystem by adapting to available resources and competition to other species, but also how it in turn impacts its environment (Polechová & Storch, 2019). It is a concept that describes how species survive competition, as well as reduce or escape competition through differentiation. This understanding of a niche can today be transposed to the ecology of digital platforms.

From a techno-optimistic tradition, the understanding of the platform economy as allowing smaller niches of cultural production to flourish ties into the notion of

“the long tail”, which has been much discussed since its inception. Popularized by the former editor-in-chief of *Wired* magazine, Chris Anderson (2008), this concept describes how new, cheap forms of digital distribution allow also more niched products with relatively small demand to accumulate consumer interest over time. According to Anderson (2008:181), “Infinite choice equals ultimate fragmentation” of consumer patterns, which also opens up possibilities for creators to become successful in much smaller niches than before. In typical jargon, Anderson (2008:183) writes that this creates “millions of microcultures, which coexist and interact in a baffling array of ways” online, allowing for much more diversified patterns of consumption and production. Illustrator Linus directly engaged with these thoughts in our interview:

Linus: It’s like that dude said a few years ago about “the long tail”. It’s in the little things. You shouldn’t try to grab onto the whole long tail, just the little bit that *is you*. You think that if you cover everything ... with the algorithms, if I cover the whole spectrum, they will recognize me. Or if I buy a word on Google [for advertising] ... say “illustrator”, that’s crazy expensive. It’s so popular that it eats up my budget much faster than if I buy “drafter” [Swe: *tecknare*]. That’s probably much cheaper. And then if I buy “fashion drafter”, that’s probably [even cheaper]. You must think smaller and smaller to find your niche, if you see what I mean.

Linus reasons that cultural producers must think of their work as being part of the “long tail”, carving out their niche in the small things rather than attempting to speak to everyone with everything they produce. Linus argues this works better to get your content prioritized both by algorithms and when working with search engine optimization and advertising. Yet, the argument about the “long tail” is complicated by how digital consumption has developed. Due to the network effects of platforms, algorithms tend to promote the most popular content and creators of a particular niche. Poell et al. (2022:143) argue that this does not contradict the fact that more niched forms of cultural expression can also trend and become popular, but that the relation between algorithmic sorting systems and nichification is more complex than techno-optimists would have us believe. While niched tails of content cater to platform business models (by serving engagement, data, and content), this does not necessarily translate into niched content being easily profitable for creators and freelancers.

As I argued in chapter 5 on patchworking, digital freelancing is characterized by processes of diversification and fragmentation, which necessitates having a broad competence, a multi-platform presence, and several income streams. Being too specialized and occupying only a small bit of the “tail” can obstruct finding enough commissions and income streams to make a living. However, being too general can in turn make it difficult to stand out with one’s brand. A challenge when constructing a brand is thus to strike a balance between generalization and specialization. Reflecting on this tension, and echoing Schumpeter’s view on entrepreneurship, content creator Matt expressed that “the emphasis should be on

finding *your own* niche. It's not just about being specialized, I mean, everyone is in some way. You must create and control your own market segment ... I think that's the important part." Having a niche was, according to Matt, about creating a space for yourself that people recognize you by — in marketing lingo, as he also said, of having a "USP" (unique selling point). Matt, for instance, argued that it was important for him to create content that has a particular graphic profile and artistic style that catches the attention of customers and fit his Instagram:

I have a particular use of very strong colors, for instance, in my images, which many have said are quite striking. That's visible if you look at my Instagram feed. I try to keep everything very coherent. I find this works well with the algorithm too. When my content is really successful, you don't have to look at my signature to see that I have created it. I want it to be recognizable.

Matt defines his niche not only in relation to what he thinks works well in relation to specific platforms. The need to have a clear niche is commonly attributed to how digital platforms and their algorithms filter content based on recognizable patterns. Individualized forms of data-driven algorithmic consumption create taste-based rather than demographic-based patterns in consumer trends, where even weird TikTok trends or "hyper-niche 'taste communities'" (Poell et al., 2022:140) can become profitable — at least until consumer desire again is redirected elsewhere.

In relation to how Instagram users can catch others' attention, Zulli (2018:144) writes that users are encouraged

to have a "shtick" or a theme to set one's account apart from the millions of images that Instagram is inundated with (Hiscott, 2014), such as the foodie, the world traveler, the fitness guru, the animal lover, the ironic hipster, and so on. The specific brand is irrelevant as long as users have one. The more consistent the brand, the more likely viewers will glance at the account.

A clear brand niche becomes a way of adapting to platform algorithms and how they create individuated user experiences and feeds. Adapting a "shtick" for one's brand is thus ironically both a form of individualization (highlighting what distinguishes someone from everyone else) and objectifying standardization (which makes individuals sortable and categorizable to algorithms and other users). This recalls what Adorno and Horkheimer (1997:154), in relation to a much earlier stage of the cultural industries, called *pseudo-individualization*. They used this concept to describe how commodities and brands (and by extension, people like celebrities) have to be differentiated in consumer societies to stand out and create consumer demand, but not be so different that they break the patterned expectations of consumers. While their often-reductive take on popular culture has rightly been much criticized for failing to account for the agency of consumers and the meaning they attach to their practices, I would argue that pseudo-individualization is a useful concept for understanding self-branding in the platform economy.

From my material, branded self-presentations often seem to draw on similar adjectives and what Illouz (2007:82) calls “cultural scripts of the desirable personality”, often derived from other successful professionals within one’s field. Platform affordances further govern users to pseudo-individualize by having them adapt to certain formats, trends, and activity patterns if they want to become algorithmically visible (cf. Bucher, 2018). The responsibility of finding out how to do this successfully falls solely on individual freelancers, who have to draw on their networks and algorithmic gossip (Bishop, 2019). Matt reflected that

it is a constant job trying to keep up to date. I engage much in Facebook groups and watch many YouTube videos. You know, like ‘This is how you game the Instagram algorithm to get 10 000 followers’ (laughs). Much of it is bullshit and speculation. But that’s the only thing you have to go on, really. And plain trial and error.

Sara, another content creator, told me that she had spent about a year before she started her company doing market and target group analyses, taking courses in search engine optimization, and carefully strategizing her brand niche and how it would fit into the market. She reasoned that this had helped her establish herself and find commissions by occupying a space of her own:

Sara: I’m very alone in my niche, and that’s beneficial in many ways of course. I absolutely think that helped me establish myself as quickly as I did and to get that attention. [...] That’s how I came up with my business idea from the start. I saw there was a big hole in the market where I felt “I can step in here and do something”. But sometimes I wish there were more people. When I find someone [and think], “This person almost does the same thing as me. We almost have the same niche”, that helps me sharpen my brand even more. [...] Because then I can see in which ways we are different. What does that person do that I don’t, and what do I do that they don’t? And how can I sharpen that even more to really, like, highlight my own thing? So, in that way, competition can be helpful.

Highlighting the importance of her niche,<sup>13</sup> Sara also points to the relationality of brand niches. She argued that competition can help to develop one’s own place in the market even more and to promote certain types of brand communities, making them more viable for algorithmic promotion. At the same time, being relatively alone within her niche was, for Sara, mostly a positive thing, as she expressed that this has allowed her to build a reputation where she is the person many first think of when they seek her particular expertise. This has allowed her to differentiate her brand to attract attention to it, giving it a certain affective “ambience” to create an environment where users want to engage with it (cf. Arvidsson, 2005).

Illustrator and photographer Erik reflected on how he adapts both how he creates and promotes content on different platforms, such as Instagram and Behance, to

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<sup>13</sup> I have not disclosed Sara’s particular niche to keep her anonymity.



their affordances and algorithms. He expressed that “my style is a bit naïve and cheerful, and that doesn’t always work very well [on Instagram]. If you have a more serious touch on things ... or like, if you have some political vibe over it ... it just generates more likes, for example. I notice that. Instagram is a pretty good mirror of what people like”. On Instagram, he reflected about how he exercised a kind of self-censorship over what types of images he posted. When I asked him if he uses likes as an indication of what to post and create, he said,

Erik: Quite a bit sometimes. Sometimes. [...] It mainly affects what I post online. You become a bit, like, self-censoring actually. Particularly with my photos. You know that images of clouds always work, while portraits of humans do not for some strange reason. [...] Strict lines, architecture, minimalism, and stuff like that [works well] ... when it is visually simple to interpret but with a little touch of something, that works. So, I try to take more photos like that. The algorithm likes that, it gives you likes and grabs peoples’ attention. With the illustration, I’m not sure, but I think logotypes generally work well on Instagram. I’ve noticed that many illustrators post typographical illustrations. Like, a letter that is twisting and cool. Maybe something with figures in it. That stuff worked well for a while.

Daniel: So, what gets picked up and works well goes in trends?

Erik: Yes exactly. [...] Seriousness is not so wrong. I should work more with that to broaden my niche. There was a certain naïveté that was really popular among illustrators for a while. Where you draw with colored pencils and stuff like that, to make it look childish but still, like, vintage. That retro style was something I did a lot before, and I still have much of that in me. It trended a lot. So, there’s ... you have to be open for things like that, and see if you can adapt new trends in your works.

This passage is interesting for several reasons. First, it illustrates the feedback loop between platform algorithms and cultural production. Erik adapts what he posts and even creates to what he perceives that the algorithm and his audience “want”, which in turn, feeds back into the platform by reproducing certain trends and consumption patterns. Adapting to current trends while adding “a little touch of something” ties back to the notion of pseudo-individualization and how styles are formed in relation to pre-formed patterned expectations from consumers and platforms. This reciprocal relation also relates to the production of subjectivity, which here occurs in the tension between abstraction and individuation, or between what previously has been discussed as the subjectivation of individuals and the algorithmic subjection of *dividuals* (Lazzarato, 2014; cf. Deleuze, 1992a). As Lazzarato (2014:37) argues, platforms govern us both as subjects with a sense of self and agency (individuals) and as algorithmic profiles of data (dividuals). We see how Erik’s dividual self — formed by likes, views, online engagement quantified into metrics — feeds back on his actions as an individual and how he chooses to portray his own niche as a freelancer, hoping in turn to affect his algorithmic subjectivity.

Illustrator Olof reasoned that platform algorithms may be a deciding factor for the style of many creators today. He said that “many illustrators definitely change their style to suit Instagram. They know they get tons of likes if they do a certain picture. Maybe with less details — pictures that are quick to read. And with the colors too, that it is some ‘magical’ color combination”. Developing a creative niche in this context becomes something that happens in the interactions between the human subject and the machine, with various metrics and promises of visibility and popularity influencing what is created (Scolere, 2019).

Having a narrow niche can be problematic when trends shift. In the ever-changing landscape of the platform economy, shifting trends constitute a distinct form of precarity (see Duffy et al., 2021). Current trends on Instagram might, for instance, produce temporary target audiences that fade away when the topic stops trending. Since he started his company, graphic designer John created his niche in lettering, as in, drawing letters by hand. When he started, he said this was really popular on Instagram and that he received much exposure and feedback on his posts. There was a clear demand that allowed him to turn this into part of his niche that would attract clients. Yet, when I spoke to him, he expressed that lettering was not as trendy anymore, and as a result, he had had to reorient his creativity and branding efforts.

John: It’s a constant process [...] finding out which companies are my target group. The sharper you can make your niche, the better, I think. But then there’s also the fear you might lose some [customers].

Daniel: So is the reason you have niched yourself so much [toward lettering] that you want to have a very specific target group you speak to?

John: Yeah, a bit. I’ve thought that’s it’s better to be an expert at one thing than so-so at everything. Plus, it’s fun. But I’ve noticed that when I started out, it was very popular with the hand-crafted thing, and lettering in general. Now it’s decreased a bit [in popularity] on Instagram, so I’ve had to reorient myself a bit. How I market myself and what I emphasize. Now I’ve taken the step more toward logotypes and graphical identities.

Daniel: Because the demand for lettering has decreased?

John: Exactly. I think so, both in general and in my own case. It’s not as hot, even if there’s still a market. It was super trendy a few years ago.

Daniel: Has that required a readjustment in what you create too?

John: Yes, exactly. And a bit how I [market and promote it] too. Because it might be the same thing [I’m creating], really. If I’m doing a logotype, then I draw the letters anyway. But now I market it as if I’m doing logo, design, and identity [rather than lettering]. And then ... I have a pretty minimalist style generally, so maybe that’s my niche. [...] But yeah, it’s constantly ongoing work to find your place in the market.

We see once again how particular platforms, through the trends and content they promote, also play a role in shaping what digital freelancers produce and market. In John’s case, he had not yet changed what he creates that much, as he could re-brand

his niche in lettering toward a slightly wider specialization that worked better to attract attention. Even this, however, requires continuous efforts to carve out a place and niche in the market, and provides particular dilemmas for engaging audiences and keeping a brand consistent over time. I turn to engagement and consistency next.

## Engage your audience: Time, consistency, and affect

Brands on their own have no inherent value, but rather become valuable through the engagement of people who investment their time, affects, and attention in them. This creates what Lazzarato (1996) has called a “cultural environment of consumption” that may attract clients and investors. A large part of the work of self-branding lies precisely in trying to establish conditions for communication and affective engagement, which in the age of platforms, is largely mediated through algorithmic systems and obtuse rules of visibility.

Digital freelancers’ have different imaginaries (Marwick & boyd, 2011) of who the audience is for their self-branding performances. Which audiences are considered most important is partly sector-dependent. This can make particular platforms preferable over others. Often, however, the participants try to communicate in platform-specific ways with several audiences at once — potential clients, other freelancers, creative communities, general readers, and advertisers. Engaging audiences to contribute value to one’s self-brand can for instance be done by posting content and updates with a certain frequency, or by engaging in continuous conversations with other freelancers or followers on various platforms. Whatever the form, creating engagement involves forms of affective labor, as freelancers are expected to invest genuine care and interest in various communities. A Fiverr blog on self-branding (Williams, 2020) notes that

The key here, as is always true with social networks, is to be human, and be genuine. Don’t contribute *just* because you want to extend your freelance brand. Contribute because you *care* about the topic and the community. If the groups you join truly reflect the same concerns as your personal brand, it shouldn’t be hard.

“Being human” is, in this advice, not taken for granted but rather a conscious “key” strategy for appearing as a genuine and caring person. Despite being a form of what Gregg (2010:253) calls the “compulsory sociality” that freelancers have to engage in, freelancers are encouraged to *care* about what they post and being *genuine* about their corporate interactions, investing parts of themselves into the product they sell and the communities they engage with through affective labor.

In my interview with content creator Elinor, she expressed that “it’s lots of just commenting on others posts, being, you know, really positive. ‘Oh, that looks so good’ and ‘I really admire your work’ or ‘great advice’ and stuff like that” (laughs). She went on to say that she experienced several of these connections as meaningful

but that it also “feels a bit fake sometimes. But everyone does it. You show others that you exist and that you’re pleasant and sociable. And you encourage them to do the same on your account, engaging with your posts”. Elinor frames this as a give-and-take relation. You comment on other people’s posts both to display yourself through a kind of visibility labor (Abidin, 2016) and create engagement for their content, with the expectation that they do the same for you. As characteristic of work in the social factory, this blurs boundaries between genuine social affection and instrumentality by valorizing social communication.

Creating engagement is related to issues of *time*, such as how often freelancers need to update their accounts with new content and how much they need to interact with others. The algorithms and cultures of different platforms reward different forms of temporal engagement. Social media platforms and blogs are full of speculative advice and gossip on how often one should post or comment on particular platforms in order to gain visibility or appease algorithms (Bishop, 2019). A question often discussed in my data is what specific times are best to post content to engage audiences. Several participants told me they regularly analyze the traffic flows to their social media channels and that they use tools for auto-publishing content at strategic times. Patrik, a filmmaker who also works with managing social media, told me that he analyzes traffic to find the perfect times:

Patrik: A big challenge for me was that feeding content to social media can easily be a full-time job — there are no limits to how much [you can do] really. And you might need to do it during times that aren’t ordinary working hours. I can see when people are watching the feeds, and it’s best to post content then. It’s often in the evenings. But there are programs you can use for scheduling posts, so I use them a lot now.

Daniel: You schedule so it posts automatically at specific times?

Patrik: Yeah exactly, it’s auto-published. Because it’s not possible to work ... I think I worked very much, too much before. Because I felt that I had to publish things in evenings and weekends [...] it floats together a lot if you don’t set boundaries for your communication. At the same time, I know that extensive communication gives more exposure and creates more interest around you. [...] But you just can’t feed social media the way that corresponds to the ideal of the news feed. You can’t do it.

Patrik argues that there is potentially no limit to how much freelancers can do to produce engagement, which makes it important to set boundaries. As his narration shows, ideals of constant engagement and active feeds might have to be counteracted with practices that can balance work with everyday life to avoid overwork and burnout. Using tools for auto-publishing is one way to resist the more extensive colonization of non-work hours by demands to publish and create engagement in evenings or weekends, while still posting content at strategic times.

Algorithmic gossip often highlights the need to strike a balance between consistency and quantity. A couple interviewees mentioned Gary Vaynerchuk as an

inspiration for their self-marketing. With 10.1 million followers on Instagram and over 3.1 million followers on Twitter (as of January 2024), Vaynerchuk is a self-proclaimed social media guru and a popular figure in the discourses around how to build a digital brand. He propagates that “content is king” and that digital creators need to “focus on both quality and quantity” by creating consistent, daily value for their audience (Vaynerchuk, 2021). In one blog post, Vaynerchuk (2019) writes that his own strategy is based on “pillar content” — a “daily vlog, keynote, Q&A show, or another video” — which then is repurposed into smaller pieces of “microcontent” for specific platforms. This microcontent, he writes, “is created from each episode and is used to drive awareness back to the original long-form content. Long story short, I am constantly creating and posting as much content as possible and in a way that is contextual to each platform”. He outlines how this process

could take many different forms — for example, if you’re not comfortable on video, you could record a podcast. You might even film yourself recording the podcast so you could have a video out of it as well. And from that video or audio clip, you can create content for Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and more. Personally, I create a ton of content. I publish a new episode every day on the GaryVee Video Experience, which is distributed on my YouTube channel, Facebook Watch Page, and IGTV. I also have a daily podcast called the GaryVee Audio Experience, which is distributed on my iTunes, Overcast, and Stitcher, among some other platforms. In addition to what I just mentioned, I continually post “micro content” that is distributed to my Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Quora, and many of my other social channels (Vaynerchuk, 2019).

If what is outlined here reflects one discursive ideal for content creators, it is one that is time-consuming and resource-intensive to the extreme. Vaynerchuk notes that his “*team* is able to repurpose that one piece of content into dozens of smaller pieces of content, contextual to the platforms that we distribute them to”, highlighting the collective labor needed for sustaining such a high pace of content creation. Although most of my participants — solo self-employed who operate on a relatively small scale and who are solely responsible for their self-marketing — cannot realistically keep such a pace, the practices of repurposing content to different platforms seem to be common. The ideal of posting new things on a daily basis is a factor that many freelancers seem to negotiate their own practices in relation to. In one exchange I observed in a Facebook group, a freelancer asked for advice on how to market herself through LinkedIn. She got several replies, like this:

I’ve got lots of advice for you. The most important thing — your profile needs to be so sharp and good that I see immediately what you do. All your activities must clearly build your brand and credibility. Be active, preferably every day. Post new content, engage with your community and build networks. Offer tons of free knowledge, and combine with a blog, podcast, and vlog [video blog]. Hope that helps! [Reply from conversation in Facebook group].

Following advice and gossip such as this — having several digital channels, posting “preferably every day”, and offering “tons of free knowledge” to “engage with your community” — again points to the time and effort needed for producing and uploading daily digital content. We saw some of the problems of this in the last chapter, in how it increases unpaid work. Requiring that workers post every day or with a certain frequency in order to become “algorithmically recognizable” (Gillespie, 2017) further creates a relation of dependence on platforms, by which freelancers are disciplined into coming back to supply it with content and free labor in order to appease the algorithm.

The designer Nils was one participant who explicitly talked about Vaynerchuk’s self-branding strategies and how he tried to negotiate similar practices. He told me that he had formulated a clear plan and strategy for his self-branding efforts.

Daniel: So, you have like a plan for how often you’re to use social media and LinkedIn [...]?

Nils: Yeah, exactly. [...] I’ve done a brand guide and a marketing plan where I’ve decided that I will post things three times a week. I just don’t think I have energy for more than that. It’s pretty fun to create content, sure, but I find it anxiety-inducing to post on the platforms. But I’ve set that, at least three times, I will upload on Instagram and LinkedIn, mostly. And maybe create one video a week for YouTube. But the thing I would like the most, really, is to have a podcast where I can talk like once a week, and it becomes more of a natural dialogue where people can get a better sense of who I am. I think you need to find the platforms that suit your style and charisma the best, and where you feel comfortable and can get your message across.

Nils reflected on which means of communication would suit him best (“where people can get a better sense of who I am” and that “suit your style and charisma”) and how he could tailor them to his self-marketing in order to post consistent and personal content. He had a plan for specific days that were optimal to post on (“many seem to check social media on Sundays”) and specific times of the day when there was much traffic. However, he also expressed that it is anxiety-inducing to upload content with little control over its reception and that he gets stressed out over the demands to post a lot of content on platforms. Nils expressed that he was afraid of getting stuck in the “spiral” of obsessively using social media platforms:

Nils: Conveying my message and getting feedback and everything is super fun [...] It’s more the mechanisms that make you constantly check notifications and likes to get these dopamine kicks that I don’t like. It feels manipulative. That’s the backside of it. [...] I don’t want to get stuck in the spiral of checking likes and DMs [direct messages]. I don’t think that’s fun, when you feel like a machine just going through your feed. That’s so fucking ... that’s not where I want to be, if you get me.

Daniel: Yeah, absolutely. I can see how that easily becomes a job in itself, to check your likes and analyze traffic and adapt to the algorithm. And that it's easy to get sort of addicted to the numbers game.

Nils: Yes, exactly. And as I've understood it, the algorithm is designed in the way of maximizing the time you spend on the platform. I just feel like those are hours I will never get back. Even if it creates good things for me in the long run, I still feel that ... I don't know. It's just a boring part of it, spending time doing that. Just playing along in that game.

As part of an attention economy (Celis Bueno, 2017), digital platforms do not only discipline consumers into spending time and engagement on platforms by the dopamine kicks of scrolling the feed for ever more content. Creators themselves are also disciplined to constantly return to the platform in order to engage consistently with their audiences, analyze likes and traffic flows, interact with other freelancers, and prefigure consumer trends or produce desire. Despite Nils voicing criticism against this, he expressed he had to “play along” in order to create engagement and visibility for his brand. As seen above, he negotiated this by setting up boundaries for how often he was going to post — not every day, but consistently a few times every week. He told me that what he thinks is most important is to be consistent and keep a steady flow of updates, even if it is not every day.

As creators might not have new things to show every day, some combine works from the portfolio with recommendations and advice to other freelancers, “behind the scenes” videos from their creative process, or updates from everyday life to fill out the feed with consistent content. When I interviewed Adam, he was for instance setting up his YouTube channel, where he intended to post videos of his creative process. Others disciplined themselves into creating works outside of their employed time, through Instagram trends like creating “challenges” for themselves, such as designing a new image on a particular theme throughout a month. Some, like the photographer and content creator, Alice, created specific visual and/or thematic patterns in their feed that they try to maintain over time:

Alice: Now I've painted myself into a corner. I've tried to paint a pattern in the posts on Instagram, which takes a lot of work. Every second post I want to be connected to a blog post, which ... you see what I mean if you check my account. [...] But that means I have to write that blog post before I post on Instagram. And right now, I don't have enough time for that. So I'm thinking if I should take a pause from that.

Daniel: I see. Do you think you get more reactions and engagement from followers when you do that?

Alice: I think that's too one of those unconscious but ... unconsciously conscious strategies I have (laughs). In the back of my mind, I probably think that it generates more followers, but it's not like I sit with an Excel sheet and like “this gave so many likes, this gave that many”. I don't feel I want or have the energy to put time into that,

even though it probably had been really useful. But again, as long as it floats and it generates what I need, then I don't need to push it so hard. [...] I take it as it comes. Of course, I make plans sometimes, but not that much. I think that's also, what should I say ... part of the charm is that it is spontaneous. It's like, part of my brand, and who I am as a person.

Although Alice, as we saw earlier in the chapter, tries to update her Instagram Stories daily and post larger updates on Instagram and her blog with a relative frequency, she expressed that it is difficult keeping up the pace for patterned content she has set for herself, as it requires her to write blog posts more often than she has time for. The pattern she worked with was both thematic and visual, which made it difficult for her to suddenly break it and do something else entirely. At the same time, we see how she argues that not posting too often actually might be more in line with her brand, which she describes as spontaneous and authentic. Opposing the ideal of posting very consistently, she thus constructs a line of conflict between having a very structured feed and an authentic brand, arguing that her spontaneous way of using Instagram mirrors her personality.

The importance of consistency is also highlighted in official information from some major platforms. Head of Instagram Adam Mosseri has for instance in a few rare occasions discussed the Instagram algorithms, how to grow an audience, and how content is ranked. In an interview on Instagram's Creator account, he said,

I'm not going to say post everything everywhere, which I think you might hear a lot. But I do think one of the most important things is to experiment. It's to try new things to figure out what resonates with your audience now. 'Cause it might be different from what it was half a year, a year ago. (June 10, 2021).

In highlighting the constant adaptability and experimentalism needed to sustain engagement over time, Mosseri points out a few things that are generally recommended, such as prioritizing video over photo content, using hashtags, and maintaining "a healthy feed, a couple of feeds a week, a couple of Stories per day". He emphasized the importance of maintaining a consistent pace of content, with smaller pieces of content daily and larger posts a few times weekly.

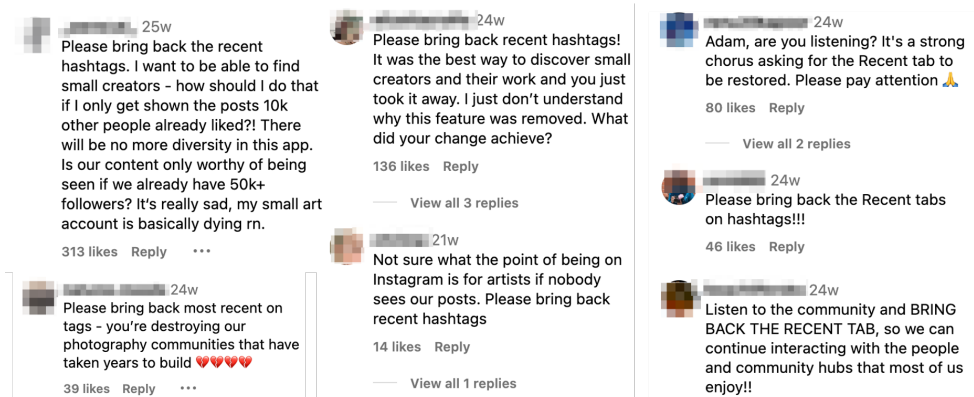
In a later post on his profile from May 31, 2023 (figure 7.4), Mosseri talks about some changes to the ranking mechanisms for different types of content since he posted the previous video (quoted above). While not disclosing very much about Instagram's algorithms in the video, Mosseri highlights how, when Instagram filters and recommends content, it takes into account certain "signals" of engagement (such as follows, messages, and how likely a user is to reply, like, share, interact, or tap on content or a profile). Otherwise, Mosseri largely distances himself and his company from the algorithms and the power they exercise over users, saying that Instagram is doing its best to match users with content they will like, but that it is up to every creator to experiment with ways of gaining traction.





**Figure 7.4:** Adam Mosseri (Head of Instagram) discussing its algorithm(s) in an Instagram post.

When this video was posted, Instagram had recently removed a function called “Recent posts” in their hashtag section, now instead only allowing users to see the most popular “Recent *top* posts”. This prioritization of top posts, which promotes content by popular creators with already high levels of engagement, made it more difficult for smaller creators that had used the “Recent” feature to reach out and build an audience. While Mosseri distances the company from the impact of such changes, the comment section of the post was full of comments by artists and cultural creators who criticized the change to the hashtag feature. This shows how the very deliberate choices of platform apparatuses like Instagram have real effects on smaller creators who are dependent on the platform:



**Figure 7.5:** Comments to the post discussed above.

We see how several of these comments critique how Instagram's changes made it much more difficult to sustain small businesses and create engagement. The comments convey a type of collective resistance and counter-conduct against what is perceived as unfair algorithms and changes that cater only to the most popular users. Some stated that they were considering abandoning the platform, pointing to exit from it as a last resort-resistance if Instagram did not bring the "recent" tab back. This example illustrates the insecurity of being reliant on ever-changing platforms to reach out to clients and audiences, in which a simple overnight update can make it difficult even for established accounts to gain traction and engagement.

Graphic designer Magnus was one interviewee who expressed how he thought it had become much more difficult to use Instagram for reaching out. He had for quite a long time had a personal Instagram account where he posted images of the works he created for fun, gaining him many followers. This success encouraged him to start freelancing and open a professional Instagram account. However, he expressed it was a very slow grind and that it is much more difficult gaining traction on Instagram now than before.

Magnus: [Previously] when you had a good hashtag, it just said "swoosh" and you had tons of people who saw what you posted. Now it's really difficult to reach out [on Instagram] if you're not already established and have many followers, or have real luck with the algorithm. So, I think that's challenging. I wouldn't say I spend a lot of time adapting to the algorithm anymore, but it's important to be consistent in your feed and what you post to your website portfolio and your social media.

Daniel: Mm. Do you try to be consistent in how often you update Instagram too, like this or that many times a week?

Magnus: No, not so much now. Previously, I thought I would make a bigger update on my work every Thursday [at] 3PM. But no, it's always so different. One time, I worked with a prototype for an app, and it took me a long time. I learned a lot, but then it was like a month where it looked like I hadn't done anything. So, I chose not to have that sort of ambition, because suddenly you're working on a big project [which you can't show]. [...] That can be quite stressful. I just try to make it look good, with smaller updates every now and then.

While maintaining that level of consistency was important, Magnus expressed that he had ceased trying to update his profiles at set intervals because of the difficulty of having new content to show. Partly, this also seems to have been caused by a slight disillusionment of reaching out on Instagram in particular, and he told me he considered other alternative platforms for self-branding where it might be easier to build continuous engagement today.

## Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I explored the self-branding of digital freelancers by identifying and analyzing four imperatives which I argue guide the subjectivation of freelancers in the platform economy: 1) you are your product, 2) just be yourself, 3) find your “shtick”, and 4) engage your audience. These imperatives, which are visible both in online discourses and in how the interviewees talk about and negotiate their practices, address workers according to the commodifying logics of the platform economy. When self-branding, freelancers are asked to relate to themselves as products and financial assets (Jarrett, 2022b) in order both to invest in their own human capital and to get others to invest in them with their attention, time, and money. These imperatives orient freelance subjects toward the business models of platforms by making them supply the platforms with content. Yet, as I show, how digital freelancers negotiate these imperatives in their self-governing is not given.

What type of subject is produced through self-branding over multiple platforms? In the intersections of the imperatives discussed above, we see the formation of a complex and ambivalent subject: coherent and dividable, measurable and unique, calculating and authentic, and diversified and specialized. As I argue in polemic with popular arguments in critical literature (e.g., Andrejevic, 2010; Marshall, 2021), this is however not a case of alienation where workers are separated from their (commodified) subjectivity. Self-branding practices can be experienced as pleasurable or painful, exciting, or anxiety-inducing. Sometimes, they force subjects to ask questions such as, “Who am I really?”, creating cracks between one’s private self-understanding and how one presents oneself to others. Yet, even when subjectivity is strategically calculated, performed, niched, and turned into an asset, the subjectivity of freelancers always exceed that which can be enclosed and commodified (cf. Hardt & Negri, 2009; Fraser, 2014). This leaves space for practices that go beyond the dictates of platform apparatuses by giving freelancers opportunities to take advantage of all the subjective and affective qualities they invest in their labor.

Nonetheless, I argue that the need to build a self-brand is embedded in the wider precarization and entrepreneurialization of the labor market. While thinking of the self as a commodity to valorize one’s subjectivity can give freelancers opportunities to get ahead, the need to individually orient one’s personality, affects, and private life to the market is, in the first place, the result of structural transformations. I argue that self-branding must be seen as an individualized solution to deal with precarity. The instrumentalization of everyday life, which is characteristic of biopolitical freelance work (cf. Fleming, 2014b), can produce particular tensions for the formation of subjectivities, sometimes resulting in precarious selves and modes of living (cf. Lorey, 2011:198). I turn to this topic in the next and last analytical chapter, where I dive deeper into the question of self-precariation and the formation of freelance subjectivities.

## Chapter 8. Self-precarization and freelance subjectivities

Erik (illustrator): In my world, everyone should freelance (laughs). It's nice, it's really nice. I've had so many euphoric rushes, which compensates for all ... all these bad periods when I've been stressed and have had trouble sleeping. It's been compensated by me living out my dream. That's how I feel. It's very subjective, of course. Some might do it more as a profession. But for me, it's my calling. It's always been.

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When I met illustrator Erik one late afternoon in the offices of an advertising agency where he hired a desk, the office was all but empty except us. Erik told me that he had quite different working habits from those employed by the agency. Usually, he would come to the office at some point after lunch, sometimes in the afternoon when others already were leaving for the day, and then work late into the evening. This was part of what he described as “living his dream” — waking up and working late, deciding over his working hours, and generally approaching work more as a creative secular calling than a stiff profession. The flipside to this dream is also acknowledged, almost in the same sentence: stress over not having enough work, long periods of insomnia and, as he expanded on in other parts of our conversation, anxiety and fear of poverty and unemployment in the future.

As narrated above, following his dream is worth the “costs” for Erik. He does not talk about his freelance status as something pushed on him but rather as something he has willingly opted in for, even suggesting that “everyone should freelance”, just like him. We see how deeply meaningful Erik's work — and the feeling that he has actively chosen it himself — seems to be for his subjectivity and sense of self. Erik does not frame it as a profession but a calling, a constitutive part of who he is, making “enterprise [...] the center towards which desire is focused” (Berardi, 2009:78). At the same time, the meaning Erik finds in his work is restricted by material working conditions, insecurity, and fluctuating income levels, which he describes have been detrimental to his health.

This chapter takes the patterns of precarity identified in the previous chapters as a starting point for exploring how structural uncertainty and precariousness intersect with the formation of freelance subjectivities in Sweden today. I analyze how the participants of the study subjectively account for their reasons and motivations for

pursuing digital freelance careers, to answer the question: How do they negotiate, legitimize, normalize, challenge, and give meaning to precarious work when they form their freelance subjectivities?

To answer this question, I adopt and seek to develop the concept *self-precarization*, understood as a mode of self-governing by which precarious work becomes a point of identification for the subject (Lorey, 2009). In line with a Foucauldian understanding of power, I approach self-precarization as a productive process. Self-precarization produces things — subjectivities, affects, meanings, ways of relating to oneself and one's work — that are not only formed in opposition to precariousness but also constituted through it. However, this is an ambivalent process. To capture this ambivalence, this chapter identifies five tensions in the narratives of the interviewees: choice and necessity, self-realization and self-exploitation, autonomy and constraint, temporal flexibility and colonization of free time, and community and competition. I argue that it is in these tensions — in a constant push-and-pull between the desire for good, meaningful and free work and the insecure realities of platform capitalism — that digital freelance subjectivities are formed and precarious freelance work normalized.

By identifying tensions, I try to not reify the experiences of my participants by typifying them as, for instance, *either* considering their freelance career as something freely chosen *or* something forced upon them. As an example, Manyika et al. (2016) separate independent workers into four segments: “free agents”, “casual earners”, “reluctants”, and the “financially strapped”. Such categories can be useful for quantitative analysis, but I am hesitant to put my interviewees in such boxes, as I think it would do violence to the complexities of their ways of reasoning. Even when they make strong claims of “always having wanted my own company” or “hating every part of being self-employed”, there are often nuances in their reasonings that complicate the picture. The strength of qualitative analysis is that it can bring out such ambivalences and nuances and to give them theoretical importance.

As will be apparent when discussing these tensions, they all in different ways relate to a search for “freedom”. My analytical concern is not to measure the degree of choice and autonomy freelancers have in shaping their careers, or to engage in philosophical debates of what freedom “really” is, but rather, what is essential for my argument is the structuring power the ideas and fantasies of being a free individual — an individual who independently and autonomously chooses one's own destiny — has for the formation of subjectivity today, and for the normalization of atypical, precarious work. This is particularly interesting in a Swedish context, which has long been associated with strong labor collectivism. Focusing on freelancers' own accounts for how they identify with their work, I seek to bring out the nuances in how they grapple with and negotiate risk, insecurity, and uncertainty in their everyday working lives when forming their freelance subjectivities. This way, I show the complexities of entrepreneurial subjectivation as grounded in a Swedish context.

## Choice and necessity

Whether a digital freelance career is perceived as self-chosen or not, and whether it is narrated as something actively embraced and desired or as something forced upon the subject from the outside, is a central tension in my material. Choice and necessity exist on a spectrum, where the reasonings of participants often lean closer to one or the other, but often flip back and forth between them and sometimes seem to coexist.

While my interviewees have all chosen to pursue “creative” careers, all have not desired to do so in self-employed fashion. Given that employed positions within the Swedish cultural industries are few and far between in many sectors (see Ilsøe et al, 2021) and platform-mediated gigs require that cultural workers can invoice through their companies or umbrella organizations, most acknowledge a structural necessity to work on freelance basis. Several participants had already started their own companies while in high school or during later studies to prepare for a labor market where teachers and others explained that they should not expect regular employment. Therefore, from quite early on, they have been socialized through Swedish schooling and other institutions to a labor market where non-standard work is to be expected.

While several interviewees express that they have not necessarily had much choice in finding employed positions within their chosen field, a majority simultaneously express a strong sense of ownership and agency over their careers, and refuse to frame solo self-employment as something that has been imposed on them. There is often an ambivalence and tension in their answers when they talk about their self-employment status, visible in the quote below from one interviewee:

Marie (blogger, copywriter and social media manager): It’s challenging that there is this constant insecurity in what you do. You constantly have to work with having foresight in your sales work, and try to secure work for a number of months ahead [to avoid periods without any income at all]. But I’ve chosen this myself, of course, so I’m aware that’s how it is. And ... that’s how I want it anyway.

We see that Marie, on one hand, explicitly points to the challenges of having a freelance career. In the interview, she expressed difficulties to plan ahead and that it is sometimes very stressful not knowing how much work or income she will receive. On the other hand, by reasoning, “I’ve chosen this myself, of course, so I’m aware that’s how it is. And ... *that’s how I want it anyway*”, freelance work in itself — the form of her employment and not only its content — is constructed as desirable. Marie’s hesitation and not-quite-enthusiastic tone of voice during these remarks indicates some degree of subjective dissonance. Yet, by aligning her free will with her current situation, she avoids framing her employment status as imposed from the outside, and instead retains a sense of subjective coherence and self-control. For Marie, as for many others, it seems like the “act of choosing creates

a powerful subjective lens” (Cohen, 2016:122) through which the participants can narrate and make sense of their working experiences, to themselves and to others.

Being a “free”-lancer evokes a discursive language of freedom, almost as if actors operate outside dominant power relations on the labor market. When asked what they like best about freelancing, the respondents often declare that it is the freedom (cf. Norbäck, 2021b). What freedom means is however not self-evident. It is a “floating signifier” without fixed meaning, or a discursive resource that freelancers can use and position themselves against when forming their subjectivities. Freedom can mean deciding when and how to work, choosing to work less, picking your own clients, or being able to work from home. Sometimes, a kind of negative freedom is also evoked – of being free *from* something, like regular employment and rigid office hours with a manager close by. While Sweden has long been associated with labor collectivism, this displays how a more entrepreneurial and individualistic mode of subjectivation has gained foothold, where full-time employment within organizations is to be avoided. A “good old job” is, for several interviewees, not attractive anymore: full-time employment, too, gives rise to burnout and stress, but lack the flexibility afforded to freelancers. Eva, a content creator and social media manager in her late 30s, explains why she quit her job to start her company:

Eva: I felt I gave so much of my time and energy to someone else. And I felt that was very draining, because I got nothing back. [...] So when my kid started pre-school, I simply quit my job. And that was ... difficult (laughs). But I was like, in the worst case, I can take a loan from my parents. I'd rather do that than go back to that workplace. I absolutely didn't feel that there was any security in choosing to freelance. Eh, but I did it anyway ... and it has turned out okay.<sup>14</sup>

Eva explains how her distaste for her old job and the feeling that she gave her time and energy without getting anything back made her quit her job to pursue a freelance career, even though that exposed her and her family to economic insecurity. Eva's reply embodies the values of Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) “new spirit of capitalism”, where autonomy, creativity, and independence become more important values than the employment security offered by hierarchical and bureaucratic organizations. Precarity is framed as the cost for being free from having a regular boss. While she says that she “absolutely didn't feel [...] any security” in this choice after having become a parent, having parents of her own whom she could borrow money from — as well as a partner with permanent employment — seems to provide some security if things would have turned out negatively. Eva's story shows the importance of both gendered and class-based dimensions for being able to “opt in” for freelance work, and that having a supportive and financially strong network can be a prerequisite for picturing this as an individual choice. The security traditionally

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<sup>14</sup> Eva was one of only a few interviewees who quit a full-time job in order to start freelancing.

offered to employed workers by the Swedish welfare state is here substituted by security through one's social networks and family.

In this example with Eva, self-precarization involves the desire to flee full-time employment. Freelancing becomes an exit from the world of alienating standard employment, if not from labor as such (cf. Fleming, 2014a). This can be interpreted as a kind of resistance against domination in a traditional employment setting, tied to entrepreneurial fantasies of self-employment as somehow existing outside of capital-labor relations. However, this gives rise to new forms of dependence, such as pushing the subject to pursue an economically insecure career path or even becoming indebted (Lazzarato, 2012). Eva's choice to quit her job and make her working life more flexible was also related to her having a child, which previous research has found to be a major reason for more women than men to start their own company to balance work and family (see Chung, 2022) — often, however, with highly ambivalent results that may intensify work both outside and within the home.

For Eva, economic uncertainty was a negative consequence she had to accept due to her choice to start her own company, even though it was not something she actively desired. However, a few other participants frame uncertainty itself as partly positive or even exciting (cf. Neff, 2007). Through such vocabularies, which embrace different aspects of enterprise and risk, precarious work is constructed as something that has been fully chosen by the individual. Consider this excerpt from my interview with the illustrator, Olof:

Daniel: You talked previously about feeling insecure about how much work you'll have. Can you say more about that? Is that like an overhanging feeling of insecurity you have?

Olof: Yes, partly. But at the same time, that is exciting too, I think. It makes you have projects going [all the time]. Of course, when you're in a dip and you really have no jobs, then it's not fun. But when you get it going again, because you usually do, then it feels really good. And I think it's exciting to consider how you can improve your marketing or your images [...]. Because, in principle, you could have really many clients if you just present your images [in a good way] or use the right platforms.

Daniel: So, the uncertainty also spurs you on in a way?

Olof: Yeah, it really does. I mean... being employed and doing the same thing every day, even if I got paid a lot for it, it hadn't been ... no, it wouldn't be very fun. Maybe it's the security itself which makes you bored. [...]

Daniel: You mean it's not only the variation in your work which makes it fun, but also the insecurity in itself?

Olof: Yeah, a bit. It's really not only a negative thing. The negative part is that you get stressed by it and it eats at you. But I think you could also see the possibilities of it, actually.

Despite being stressed and anxious over not making enough money, Olof argues that there is also a positive side to stress and insecurity. Insecurity becomes



“productive” (cf. Foucault, 1980) — it contributes to the formation of an active, opportunistic, entrepreneurial subject that sees opportunities where others might see problems. As Virno (1996:17) notes, precarious conditions can be disciplinary, as “insecurity about one’s place during periodic innovation, fear of losing recently gained privileges, and anxiety about being ‘left behind’ translate into flexibility, adaptability, and a readiness to reconfigure oneself.” Olof similarly accounts for how employment security can make you bored and passive. Self-governing through insecurity, in contrast, becomes a motivation to become the sort of active, productive, and flexible working subject (“it makes you have projects going all the time”) that competitive digital labor markets need to function.

By seeing oneself as free and enterprising, by framing necessity as a ground for autonomous entrepreneurial activity, and by explaining insecurities as self-chosen and exciting compared to stultifying permanent employment, the subject can narrate their situation with a sense of agency, coherence, and self-worth. Framing risk as exciting can also be a way of coping with contingency and uncertainty. Where uncertainty connotes passivity and forces beyond one’s control, risk implies a subject with agency who makes active choices. As Neff (2007:86) argues, “Risk gives the appearance of choice, power, and individual agency. As such, risk provides a powerful justification for the lack of security in jobs in the new economy”.

A few interviewees, in contrast, claim to have been structurally pushed into freelancing because they could not find employment within their area of expertise. Some started freelancing after their studies due to unemployment. Filmmaker and social media manager Patrik told me, “It wasn’t exactly like I found any employed positions. I looked for two years [after my studies] until I realized that no one is employing, because the sector is built around freelance work”. The Swedish Public Employment Agency did not give him much help, and therefore, he decided to start a solo company. Others started freelancing after losing employed positions, due to cutbacks and not finding employment elsewhere. Graphic designer Lizabeth, who started her own company when she was in her 50s, reflected that

I guess I felt this self-responsibility. Like, I can’t continue with what I had before and I can’t find anything else, so then I have to take it in my own hands. I probably wouldn’t have done it otherwise. I’m not from a family where people start their own companies. Being an entrepreneur did not come naturally to me at all, so it was a huge step for me. When I started, there was chaos in my head for a long time. [...] I thought about it all the time and it took me maybe two years to land in it, before I felt like I was standing on somewhat steady ground. I was far outside my comfort zone for maybe two years [...].

Daniel: I can see it being a really big step after being employed for so long. Suddenly being responsible for finding your own clients and having to think about bookkeeping and taxes and stuff.

Lizabeth: Exactly. And having to sell yourself — it’s just horrible. I still think it is.

Lizabeth explains being driven to take her career “in her own hands” by a kind of self-responsibilization. I argue this is one of the main self-technologies through which self-precarization operates. By internalizing the “responsibility for ‘its own’ health, happiness, wealth and security” (Miller & Rose, 2008:92), freelancers like Lizabeth turn structural precarity into something to overcome on their own. As narrated above, choosing to freelance was, for Lizabeth, associated with its own problems: affective (self-doubt, stress, antipathy about having to “sell” and market herself), as well as material (economic stress). Yet, these are presented as problems of the past which she has now mostly overcome, which lends her a sense of accomplishment and competency.

Others started freelancing with the hope it would lead to employment later. This was the case with Susanne, a photographer in her 30s. She started her own company in high school because she realized she could not count on finding employment. Similar to some other interviewees, she framed taking freelance gigs as a hopefully temporary condition before finding regular stable employment — her freelancing was aspirational and oriented toward an uncertain future (cf. Duffy, 2017). In the spring of 2020 (a year before our interview), after having freelanced for six years, Susanne had finally been offered a 50% employed position as a photographer at a newspaper. She told me, “It felt unreal. As I said before, it’s so damn unique to be offered a position like that. I ran around in my apartment and was all excited for several days!” Disappointingly, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world soon after, the job offer was retracted. Susanne lost not only a stable job opportunity she had longed for but also her planned summer job and other freelance commissions. Susanne describes this as a quite hard blow for her, as she had trouble finding freelance commissions around the time.

Susanne: When you think you will get such an opportunity, and it’s just pulled away from you, you just feel like “it was too good to be true”. It was very disappointing. At least I got an [art grant] around the same time. It gave me a little hope that I wasn’t entirely worthless. But you lose confidence when you stop hearing from [clients].

Difficulties to find an employed position and sustaining her freelance career created a precarious sense of subjectivity for Susanne, at least as she narrates it here. She accounts for how the difficulties of getting out of her freelance position and support herself affected her self-confidence and generated feelings of disappointment and worthlessness, making her internalize the demands and responsibilities of the labor market and direct the blame for her difficulties toward herself. With Berlant’s (2011) notion, this reflects a form of cruel optimism, where Susanne’s attachment to her career as a professional photographer, while deeply meaningful to her, also has taken an affective toll on her. When I asked her if she thinks she will be freelancing in five years, she said,

Susanne: I probably will, if I’m not finally permanently employed somewhere. That is the dream and goal with everything. But if I’m not [employed], then I have to

continue with this. Because it's the only thing I want [being a photographer], and the only thing I think I can do. I don't see anything else... I have trouble imagining what I'd do otherwise. It's just so self-evident.

Daniel: Mm. You mean that being a photographer is self-evident, not freelancing?

Susanne: No, that part [freelancing] is just scary. I want to be employed, that's my dream. And to work with photography. But the freelancing I hopes passes soon so I can get some stability finally. I'm a bit weird, I don't think I've heard anyone say this, but I want to be at one place until I retire. That sounds really depressing (laughs).

We see here that, even among interviewees who claim to have started freelancing out of necessity rather than choice, the world of precarious work is presented as something more or less inevitable. Susanne repeated several times in the interview that she considers her desire for stable full-time employment “weird” and “depressing”, which means that she seems to form her subjectivity in relation to perceived norms of self-employment and flexible careers as a new line of normality (cf. Lorey, 2015). What could be interpreted as a desire to live according to an older, traditional Swedish work ethic that privileges a life of diligent and dutiful work for the same employer, thus appears as very conflicted. From this way of reasoning, it is rather the stability of permanent employment which becomes understood as the new abnormal.

## Self-realization and self-exploitation

In their narrations, participants often express that they, through their work, want to grow as persons, live out creatively, and create meaningful lifestyles that will allow them to live to the fullest. Such future-oriented fantasies of self-realization through work have been shown to be important components of neoliberal discourses of creativity and work (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Reckwitz, 2021). Sweden, in particular, stands out globally as one of the countries with the strongest post-materialist values of self-expression and autonomy, which values self-realization highly (WVS, n.d.). I argue that such fantasies and value are also central drivers of self-precarization today, which might push subjects toward self-exploitation and to accept and even identify with insecure and exploitative working conditions.

With self-exploitation, I mean the tendency among workers with creative jobs to willingly engage in overwork, unpaid labor, and to “push themselves to the limits of their physical and emotional endurance” (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011:6) in order to remain competitive. While this concept is useful for theorizing cultural work, it should be used somewhat carefully, as it “can mask true relations of exploitation, almost letting capital off the hook” (Cohen, 2012:146). An example of this is found in the popular writings of philosopher Byung-Chul Han. According to

Han (2015:49), in self-exploitation, “the exploiter is simultaneously the exploited. Exploitation now occurs without domination”. At another place, he writes that

Today, everyone is an auto-exploiting labourer in his or her own enterprise. People are now master and slave in one. Even class struggle has transformed into an inner struggle against oneself (Han, 2017:11).

Even without taking Han’s sweeping generalizations into account (that *everyone* today is their own entrepreneur), this is a problematic view that displaces all antagonism between exploiter and exploited, and takes the entrepreneurial ideas it sets out to criticize as an existing fact. Contra Han, and following Fleming (2014a:172), I think self-exploitation is better understood as an individual’s “over-identification with his or her own domination”, and thus, as one modality for exploitation today. In traditional Marxist terms, exploitation is increased by management imposing labor intensification. In self-exploitation, this intensification is driven by self-governing workers, who as Bloom (2013) argues, seek to “take control” over their own exploitation and profit on it themselves. However, such fantasies, so visible in digital freelance arrangements, do not necessarily signal less exploitative labor markets. Today, they are indicative of how employers and clients view modes of self-organizing as more effective for value extraction than extensive control and micro-management (see also Chung, 2022:72).

The interconnectedness of self-realization and self-exploitation can turn negative experiences into sources to learn and improve from. Self-realization is often related to ideals of self-optimization — of making more of oneself, of improving one’s skills and capabilities, and of developing to the fullest of one’s potential. As Bröckling (2016:34p) notes, “The self-entrepreneur is never finished”: it is a subject in constant becoming. Even negative working experiences, long periods of underemployment, episodes of wage theft, or periods of sickness are in my material sometimes referred to as valuable experiences for self-discovery and self-improvement. Swedish statistics show that many who have suffered occupational sickness or burnout may see freelancing and self-employment as a solution for a less stressful life (Bucht, 2022). This was the case for Matilda, a photographer and content creator. Below, she reflects on what she learned from being burnt out:

Matilda: But the benefit of that experience [of having been burnt out] is that I have had to become much more forgiving to myself. [...] I think that’s a big challenge when you’re self-employed, which many underestimate. Bookkeeping and stuff, you can get help with that. But what you really have to work with the most is yourself. If you don’t function [Swe: *funkar inte du*], and you don’t even know how you function and how to set up routines which help you forward, then it won’t work in the long run. It might work for a short time if you run over yourself and find some method which you tell yourself will work. But I think the more honest you are with yourself, also about your less flattering sides, the better.

Matilda describes her burnout not primarily as a result of an unsustainable work situation, but of herself not knowing how to deal with it. Self-exploitation — in this case, Matilda pushing herself to overwork so much that she was burnt out — is narrated as character-building and as a valuable experience from which she has learned more about herself and how to develop better routines. Her experience is framed not only as a warning example but also as a therapeutic technology of the self through which she has produced self-knowledge about her boundaries and “less flattering sides”. She voices a view that, as a freelancer, you are primarily your own worst enemy, both exploiter and exploited in one (cf. Han, 2015). To manage, what you therefore “have to work with the most is yourself”. We see how freelance work, in the lack of obvious external control, becomes a source of self-discipline.

The example of Matilda shows how self-realization and self-exploitation are not dichotomous categories but express an ambiguous tension. We see this also if we go back to the quote by Erik at the very beginning of the chapter, where he says that freelancing is his “calling” and that “all these bad periods when I’ve been stressed and have had trouble sleeping ... They’ve been compensated by me living out my dream”. *Living out my dream* is a clear expression of the ideal of self-realization through work. It indicates a meaningful form of subjectivation, where Erik’s mastery over his work becomes the center of his desires and passions. Yet, the stress, anxiety, and sleeplessness which he also refers to in the same sentence are not merely what Fleming (2014a:3p) calls biopolitical “negative externalities” to this dream, in the sense of existing outside of it. On the contrary, these affective reactions seem to be the result of pursuing his dream. His subjectivity is formed in a complex web of pleasures and disappointments.

It is worth lingering on Erik’s use of the word *calling* (which is used by several other interviewees too), which here indicates a quite different work ethic than the one famously analyzed by Weber (2005) in relation to the emergence of capitalism. The protestant work ethic identified by Weber was also sacrificial, but it asked subjects to forsake material gain and individual pleasure by embracing hard, dutiful work as an ethical obligation in itself, regardless of the particular type or content of work (Weber, 2005:25). The calling referred to by Erik is different: it does not treat work *as such* as an end in itself, but as a means to form a meaningful subjectivity and self-conception. Farrugia (2022:34) calls this a post-Fordist work ethic, which, in contrast to the protestant work ethic, “positions the cultivation of the self as an end in itself that is pursued primarily through work, understood as a realm of autonomous self-realization and enjoyment”.

Erik expanded later in the interview that telling himself that he’s “living out [his] dream” might be a kind of coping mechanism for enduring precarious work and his fears of ending up in poverty. When I asked him how important his work is for his personal identity and how he views himself, he replied,

Erik: Of course, I have some kind of occupational pride. And like, I probably see myself as a freer individual than all those nine-to-fivers [Swe: *de där knegarna*, with simulated Stockholm accent] (laughs). [...] But I was probably cockier before. Now,

I'm more like, "take it easy" [to myself]. Because I think it's based in some kind of fear that if I don't see myself as freer than others, then it would not be worth doing this. So, you guard yourself in a way. Like, even if I don't earn nearly as much as an employee, you're very quick to think that "at least I have this freedom".

Erik takes a very self-reflexive position to the idea of himself as a "freer individual". He explains how this way of reasoning motivates him, but how it also allows him to pursue his career without really questioning whether it is actually worth it or not. We see the ambivalence in how Erik speaks about his imagined freedom — "*at least I have this freedom*" — going back and forth between framing himself as a freer individual than those with standard employment who only work to secure their material living conditions, and as a sort of affective fantasy which helps him cope with insecurity and upholds his professional subjectivity in spite of it (cf. Berlant, 2011). Accounting for himself as a "freer individual" who follows his deepest dream, seems to allow Erik to endure and make sense of working conditions he maybe would not accept otherwise, such as insecure levels of pay and work which cause him sleeplessness, anxiety, and fear for the future. Yet, there also seems to be a fragility to these fantasies, as Erik also describes them as a kind of shield he uses to "guard [him]self" against the thought that pursuing a freelance career might not be worth the costs. If he should cease to think of himself as freer than "knegarna",<sup>15</sup> he seems to say, then it would almost be that he would have deceived himself.

Writing about the post-Fordist work ethic mentioned earlier, Farrugia (2022) points out how this takes different forms for workers with different class positions. While many middle-class workers might be guided by *passion* as a modality for self-realization through work, people from working class backgrounds might rather strive for self-realization through aspirational logics of *achievement* and social mobility (Farrugia, 2022:50, 74). Both these modalities of self-realization are visible in my material, though the logic of passion is more dominant. The logic of self-realization through passion is, in the narratives of the interviewees, often connected to ideas of being driven by a need to create and of living a life where ideas and creative whims are allowed to freely flourish. Several participants articulate themselves as artistic or bohemian subjects, for whom self-realization is a question of self-expression and creating things they are passionate about. When asked what she likes most about her work, illustrator Lizabeth responded,

It's that I get to do exactly what ... not exactly what I want, but I get to live out my passion in some sense. I get to do what I think is the most fun, namely, to illustrate and create with form and color.

For Lizabeth, self-realization is a question of doing what is fun and pleasurable, rather than wasting time on a job that is unstimulating or alienating. This pushed her

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<sup>15</sup> "Knegare" is a half-condescending Swedish term for well-adapted, working-class laborers; Erik's simulated Stockholm accent and laugh create an ironic distance to his use of the term.

to start her company despite, as we saw in the last section, being stressed over this choice and disliking certain parts of freelancing, such as having to “sell herself”. For her, insecurity and excessive self-promotion was something she had to endure in order to be able to make a living on what she was passionate about — illustration.

Content creator Alice said she dealt with her often meager paycheck and insecure workload by saying, “If you’re passionate about something, you don’t really see the problems”. This way of reasoning resurfaced in other interviews. While the interviewees acknowledge and problematize certain aspects of their working conditions, these problems are often framed as aspects you just have to accept, live with, and/or ignore if you want to pursue your passion. This ties into old imaginaries and tropes of the “suffering” or “tormented artist” that provide discursive resources through which workers can make sense of their situation and form their subjectivities (cf. Alacovska & Kärreman, 2023). Through such imaginaries of what a creative career entails, precarity itself is sometimes embraced as a kind of symbol for being passionate (cf. Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2020:12). This also ties back to the discussion of cultural work as a calling. Reflecting on his motives for pursuing a freelance career as a graphic designer, Adam said,

Adam: I think it’s a combination of many ... okay, if I say like this. Is it *fun* to make art? Is it *fun* to work with design? Eh, I don’t know if “fun” is the right word. When I make art, now when I think about it, it’s not like I sit and smile. I never laugh while I’m painting. So really, it’s not about whether it’s fun or not, it just something ... it’s a will to get something out there. I often describe it as when I’m not doing it [creating], there’s always a black hole. When I don’t do it, the black hole grows, and the more it grows, the worse I feel. The more I do it [create], the smaller the hole becomes. Eh ... it never completely goes away. There’s always a hole there. In other words, I never get satisfied. But as long as I’m creating, the hole gets smaller.

In this account, Adam distinguishes himself from those saying they have cultural professions because it is “fun”. He argues that he is not so much driven by pleasure as by an existential need to create in order to reduce the “black hole” within him. While he framed freelancing as a “necessary evil” in order to work creatively, he compared it to what he described as the “soul-crushing” alienation of working as a telemarketer. While he reasoned that the black hole within him “never completely goes away”, his freelance career allows him to form a more meaningful and self-expressive sense of self than he otherwise could. Yet, as Berardi (2009:135) notes, in the transition from boring or unfulfilling work to creative and self-expressive careers, “the word ‘alienation’ is replaced by words capable of measuring the effects of exploitation on cognitive activity: panic, anxiety, depression”. In Adam’s case, while his creative career allowed him to reduce his existential black hole, he also told me he had struggled with episodes of burnout, as well as regular stress and anxiety over not being able to relax from and think about things other than working.

Other narratives around creativity are also visible in my data. Some more directly link creativity to an entrepreneurial understanding of growth and innovation (cf.

Florida, 2002). To the same question as above, of what they like best with their work, graphic designer Magnus said, “The creative part, once again. Being allowed to be creative and to do things that haven’t been done before. To do a logotype that has never been created before for a new company”. Magnus talked about creativity not so much in terms of self-expressivity but as a way doing *new* things which have not been done before. This aligns with a Schumpeterian understanding of the entrepreneur as a “creative destroyer and innovator” (Bröckling, 2016:70). Content creator Sara similarly said about what she liked best with her job:

Sara: That I’m allowed to use my creativity and ideas exactly as I see fit. There’s no one who says, “That sounds fun, but now you have to do this instead”. All my creativity can, like, be invested in myself and my projects. I find that very pleasurable and rewarding. And I ... yeah, I think it’s fun to run things myself and let my ideas guide me in a way. It’s very stimulating. And that I have more control over how I live my life, how I structure my days ... that freedom, it means very much.

In this account, creativity intersects less with artistic discourses than with entrepreneurial figures of reasoning: of creativity being valued for innovation, of being “*invested* in myself and my projects”, and of letting one’s creativity be a guiding light for enterprise. The type of creative subject that is produced here is thus less a traditional artistic one where commerciality is frowned upon (cf. Bourdieu, 1996), and instead comes closer to the values of Florida’s (2002:69) creative class, that use their creativity for inventing new commercial products and solving problems. Creative goods are here not primarily valued for their inherent qualities or aesthetic properties but as commercial products that can generate innovation, profit, and growth.

Farrugia’s (2022:74) notion of “subjects of achievement”, who find self-realization through a sense of social mobility in relation to work rather than through passionate attachments, express a logic that is also visible among some participants. This reflects an aspirational logic primarily among subjects with working-class or lower middle-class backgrounds. Graphic designer Erik described himself as coming from a lower middle-class background. As a child, he lived with his mother who also had her own company but where earnings generally were unstable. He reflected that having his own company and being able to make money on creating in itself was a form of self-realization for him:

With my background, you know, I haven’t had very much [money] ... if I earn, like, 10 000 kronor on one job, then I feel really damn glad. It’s very motivating. So, there’s a little capitalist within me that just (laughs) ... you know, money partly decides the value of your work. So if I get [good pay] ... it’s a way for the client to show that, okay, this is what we think you’re worth. That doesn’t mean I have anything against ... I mean, I would like to be an artist and sell more images that way. But I don’t see any contradiction there. This is, like, my livelihood. [...] I’m not shy



to say that I like to make money on my stuff. I think most people like that [...] but it's considered a bit ugly to talk about (laughs).

Accounting for how others consider it “a bit ugly” to talk about making money on cultural work, and referring to the greedy “little capitalist” within him, Erik reasons that making money on his creativity becomes proof of good work and, in extension, a measure for his self-worth. Returning to Bloom's (2013) argument from earlier, Erik's reasoning displays fantasies and desires of self-mastery, through which he can “subjectively take control and materially profit from [his] own life” (Bloom, 2013:787). Conversely, Erik also described the periods when he had less work and made little money as very demanding and draining on his self-confidence, as this becomes a mirror of his own perceived inadequacies.

Being able to support himself as a freelancer was also for photographer and filmmaker Marcus a positive point for subject formation. He said that “it has really become my own thing now, which I can stand for and feel proud for”. As we see below, the logic of achievement intersects with the logic of passion in his response:

Marcus: Being able to work with and make money on your passion, that's the best thing. I never actually thought it would work, in this sector.

Daniel: Did you feel unsure when you started if it would amount to anything?

Marcus: Yes, exactly. And all people around me too.

Daniel: So you have had to deal with people in your proximity too who question your choice to start a company?

Marcus: Yeah. In the beginning, there was a lot of that. Like, “You must take a side job too so you can support yourself!” But I was like, “Let's see where this leads”. I was as surprised [as them] when I felt, “Wait, I might actually be able to live on doing this”. Everyone else was probably surprised too. It felt really good, it did.

We see in this excerpt how Marcus forms his subjectivity in relation to social norms and expectations of others. None of his relatives had any experience of self-employment, and therefore warned him that his career choice was risky and unrealistic. By being able to make a living as a freelancer, Marcus proved both to himself and those around him that he is good at his work and that he has managed to make something of himself. His company becomes a symbol for this professional self-realization and achievement against which he can shape himself as a subject. Yet, to succeed with this, Marcus also had to push himself hard and to engage in self-exploitative practices. On the topic of what he thought was the most difficult thing about freelancing, Marcus said that

Marcus: It's the clichéd things, you know. You don't know when you will have your salary. That insecurity is the toughest part. Sometimes, the workload [too], that it can

be just so much. But ... yeah, I expect that everyone says the insecurity is the worst part. And it is, it's tough. To not have fixed contracts and such. But I think there's more pros than cons to it.

Arguing that there are more pros than cons to freelancing, he pits different imaginaries of work against each other. The permanent position, which is imagined as safe and secure, but unstimulating and unfulfilling, is compared to the personally rewarding and flexible freelance position with insecure working conditions. By doing so, he can account for the insecurities of his career choice and make them understandable, in the light of having opted in for a model of work that values self-fulfillment and achievement over employment security and social stability.

To summarize, the tension of self-realization and self-exploitation shows how experiences of work are individualized and directed towards the self. In a Swedish context, this points to a new kind of work ethic. The Swedish work ethic has, through much of the 20th century, been oriented toward the moral obligation to work in order to pay off one's social debt (Swe: *göra rätt för sig*) and not be a burden to society (Swe: *inte ligga samhället till last*) (see Dahlstedt & Vesterberg, 2019). When self-realization becomes a guiding logic, collectivist values of work are replaced, or at least complemented: work becomes an individual project for self-realization.

## Autonomy and constraint

Beyond self-realization, the interviewees who frame freelancing as an active choice often express that they want to freelance because it gives them self-determination and autonomy to pick what clients to work with, to choose their own commissions, and to structure their own working days. Autonomy, Mackenzie and McKinlay (2020:3) suggest, is “that which is both negotiated and governed in contemporary neoliberalism”. In their search for professional and creative autonomy, the tradeoff is that workers also have to accept precarity and uncertainty. While this might be a prioritization that they do very willingly, it can come with unforeseen consequences and structural constraints that limit the autonomy they desire to have.

Employment contracts tend to be open-ended in terms of content — workers provide their labor power for a specific amount of time, which management decides how to use. Non-standard freelance contracts are, in contrast, more specific regarding *what* is to be produced than *how* (Movitz & Sandberg, 2009:241). Especially in the cultural industries, where value is extracted from “harnessing individual and collective creativity” (McKinlay & Smith, 2009:29), contractors tend to retain relatively much autonomy over how they structure their work. From their stories, it is however clear that the participants seldom have full autonomy to choose exactly what to work with and under which circumstances. As we saw in previous chapters, competition may push them to take on routine assignments with bad

working conditions and low pay. As they lack collective agreements, they often cannot control their deadlines and workload, which often pivots between overwork and underemployment. They often have to combine freelance commissions with side jobs and other kinds of income to support themselves, which often are not perceived as creative or stimulating. What they have is thus often more akin to what Cohen (2016:117) calls “micro-autonomy”, which is shaped by wider structural circumstances, market-demand, and control systems (algorithmic and otherwise) they have little influence over.

To illustrate this, we can go back to Marcus, a filmmaker and photographer in his early 20s who largely supports himself by creating advertising content for social media. When I met him, he was a bit late to the interview. He hurried up to me outside of the café where we had decided to meet around lunchtime, and explained that, the same morning, he had been contacted by a client whom he had worked with before, and this client wanted him to create and edit an advertisement video with a deadline later in the afternoon. I asked him if he really had time for the interview and said that it was perfectly understandable if he wanted to postpone it, but he reassured me that it was fine and that he would manage. During our hour-long talk, he told me he was used to these short-notice commissions.

Marcus: It’s a collaboration I have with an agency... they write me from time to time. This dropped in this morning, and they were, like, “Can you fix it during the day?” They get asked by one of their clients, and then they send it on to their freelancers. They have a certain budget for it, which is set already, and then you say “yes” or “no”. I always try to say “yes” to keep good relations [with the agency].

Work in the freelance platform economy is often promoted through ideologies that celebrate the autonomy and flexibility it brings to workers in deciding over their own working hours. This is also an often-accounted motivation for why my interviewees freelance: to become more independent, to autonomously decide over their time, to be “their own boss”. This was the case with Marcus. Once again, his narrative was ambiguous. Despite the short-notice deadline from a client which had him re-schedule other tasks which he had planned for, and despite the perceived need to accept stressful commissions so as not to sour their professional relationship, he maintained that he himself primarily was responsible and in control over how he structured his work. He told me that the best thing with freelancing was being able

to decide when to, like, edit, or when to do other things, whatever is most important at the moment. To decide over your time and when to do what — that’s the biggest advantage with freelancing, I would say [...] To control your own time, and also that you have something to stand for, kind of. That you have ... built something from the ground up that is your own, and that you have full control over.

Marcus articulates an entrepreneurial subjectivity where he identifies with his company and frames his formal autonomy as a kind of freedom. However, this

freedom is conflicted. He explains, “It’s easy to be burned-out as a freelancer, because you’re living in it all the time and you can’t... it sounds like a cliché, but it feels like you’re working all the time”. He told me that he usually works several extra hours in the evenings to manage everything that needs to be done, especially when he gets short-notice gigs, and that he, during hectic periods with many deadlines, sometimes works up to 16 hours a day. Marcus’ narrative illustrates how desires for autonomy can co-exist more or less harmoniously with structural constraints, which, in some sense, seem to deny or restrict this same autonomy.

Desires for autonomy guide several other participants too in how they narrate their motivations for pursuing freelance careers. This is often expressed when they state that they desire to “be my own boss”, which signifies controlling their own time, choosing their own commissions, and deciding how to structure their work. “Being my own boss” also signifies a lack of external authorities who control their time and give them orders, essentially signaling an entrepreneurialization of the self (Bröckling, 2016). Several interviewees explain how the desire to not have a boss has motivated them to freelance, like Eva below:

Eva (content creator, social media manager): I was probably ... a great employee, because I was very engaged and gave very much of myself. But at the same time, I wanted things my way. When someone told me how to do things, there was like a crisis within me (laughs). [...] And I felt that so much of my engagement disappeared when I had to adapt too much. My creativity died. That’s why it’s really nice to not have a boss, to be my own boss.

In narrations like these, there is an inscribed critique both of everyday life centered around a nine-to-five job, and a critique of bureaucratic authority as irrational, alienating, controlling, or as stifling creativity. At another point, Eva told me that “I’m, like, the worst at having a boss” and that “the idea of being ‘your own’ is that you are not owned by someone else”. This indicates a self-conception as a freer and less alienated person than those who “sell themselves” to an employer, which might function as a driver of self-precarization (cf. Alberti et al., 2018). Sometimes, this line of reasoning also includes a critique of working for big, exploitative companies. Matilda, who had previously worked at an advertising agency, said that

Matilda (copywriter, content creator): It was pretty obvious when I was at the agency, and I felt, “Why should I make this money for someone else?” Especially when you’re in projects where you notice that it’s *me* who the client wants to work with.

Although Matilda critiques the relation between employer and employed, what is practiced here is a decidedly individualistic critique of capital–labor relations, as an obstacle to individual freedom and flourishing. The relation between freelancer and client is in contrast framed as a pure equal business transaction, where you primarily work for and create value for yourself (cf. Cockayne, 2016). Recognizing herself as

the one who clients want to work with, and capitalizing on that, was described by Matilda as an empowering feeling.

A few interviewees more directly questioned what the supposed autonomy and freedom of being a freelancer actually entails, sometimes voicing a more structural critique. The filmmaker and social media manager, Patrik, explicitly argued that the autonomy one enjoys as a freelancer is restricted by precarious and vulnerable working conditions:

Patrik: After having been in it, I can say that it can easily become a prison for you. Because you are whipped to accept all commissions, and I think people often forget that. People say that, as cultural workers “you do something you love”. Yeah, but if you’re to make a living while doing it, you cannot afford to say “no” very often. You must accept everything, basically. And where’s the freedom in that? It’s not me who’s in control, but someone else. So, I hope that this image of the “happy free cultural worker” is revised a bit, eventually.

Patrik contrasts what he perceives as the cultural imaginaries of freelancing to its material conditions. Questioning what promises of freedom or autonomy really mean for cultural workers, he argues that being free from regular employment also puts the individual in a dependent position that itself can turn into a kind of “prison”. Through this narration, he draws on and articulates a kind of ideology critique of neoliberal discourses of entrepreneurship to make sense of his own situation. He said that with the gig economy, “We’ve gone very far in some kind of neoliberal direction [...] it’s this illusion of having full control and freedom yourself ... which I don’t think anyone doing gig work actually experiences”. What the gig economy offers, according to Patrik, is a kind of “illusion of freedom” (cf. Woodcock, 2020). At another point, he said that “people being their own entrepreneurs, I think there’s something completely crazy with that”, almost directly engaging with conceptions of the neoliberal “entrepreneur of himself” (cf. Foucault, 2008: 226) as a figure of contention, positioning himself in opposition to these discourses and ideals.

While Patrik still had his own company for creative projects when I talked to him, he had recently managed to opt out of freelance work by finding a permanent position as a social media manager and communicator for a local cultural organization. Lacking other forms of collective resistance, making an exit can be seen as a form of exodus (Virno, 2003) or line of flight (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988) from precarious employment. For Patrik, finding employment that still was relatively within his area of interest was likely helped by his wide social network and the reputational capital (Gandini, 2016) he had accumulated during almost two decades of freelance work, which highlights that the choice of giving up freelancing for permanent employment is not open for everyone. However, as social media management was not what Patrik primarily wanted to work with, he had to put his filming career to a halt, as he seldom had energy for his creative projects after his ordinary working days, and now had work which was less creatively stimulating.

Even when it does not take the shape of explicit ideology critique, desires and fantasies of becoming autonomous and self-directed can clash with an everyday reality where it is difficult to find work, which undermines one's actual autonomy. Nils, a designer in his mid 30s, ended his career as an employee in a company in industrial design almost three years ago to start his own company where he would be in control. He told me he did not want to feel like a meaningless corporate "cog in the machine". To live closer to nature, Nils moved to Northern Sweden with the ambition to only work remotely by taking on digital commissions he found meaningful. However, in the interview, he expressed that he felt isolated and stressed over not knowing how much income he would have in the upcoming months: "It's very difficult to plan and to know where and when you will get any money. That makes it very hard to make ends meet certain months. It's definitively a stress".

Being a self-entrepreneur, which Nils had hoped would let him do work which he found meaningful and to balance work with other social activities, had, when I talked to him, led to something of a dead end. He reflected that things had not "turned out right". He retained hopes of making his freelance career work better in the future, but he expressed feeling stuck due to loneliness, as well as having to work constantly to make ends meet. Part of his reason for freelancing, he told me, was that he wanted a lifestyle where he could work less. While he described how starting his own company had made his work more personally meaningful to him, he also accounted for how he now finds himself in a situation where he works more than ever before, lacking much of the autonomy he had desired to decide things for himself:

Nils: I always try to take a day [per week] when I turn off and don't think of work at all, because I think the brain needs that to gain clarity. A day of rest. But other than that, it's full speed. I spend almost all the time when I'm awake [working]. Of course, I take breaks, but it's a lot of work. You have to be ready for that. It's been challenging for me, because I'm really quite lazy. I think it's pretty nice to take it easy and not work. I haven't really understood the charm of working (laugh).

Daniel: No, and I think that goes back to what you said before, right? That you would really like to work less and that you think we in general attach too much importance to work?

Nils: Exactly. It's paradoxical that now I'm working all the time. It hasn't really turned out right. In the long run, I hope [that] I'm able to take a step back. Because it's the lifestyle I really want. To have meaningful work, absolutely, sure. But I want to create a good lifestyle with good social relations and good health, that's what I want. That's my real goal, and that's got nothing to do with work. So, yeah, I realize that, and it's good you see the connection too, because it's true. It's a paradox to work more when you really want to work less and you just seek a certain lifestyle.

Nils explains that he did not primarily start his own company to find more meaning *in* work, but to create conditions for making life *outside* of work more meaningful. He pursued a freelance career to work less, not more. Yet when I spoke to him, he found himself in a situation where the opposite was true, as he says he spends all his waking hours working. This is reminiscent of the paradox identified by Bologna (2018:136), through which “planned leisure time, instead of growing, becomes less and less controllable” for freelancers due to the constant need to manage deadlines, business relationships, and jobs just to stay afloat. The promises of autonomy can for some become a kind of precarity trap (Armano & Murgia, 2013), or a prison, as described by Patrik above, where the structural constraints and material conditions of a freelance career make it, if not impossible, then at least difficult to be truly autonomous: desires for autonomy and freedom “becomes [the] very mechanisms through which work is rendered insecure and intermittent”, as Poell et al. (2022:125) put it. I dive deeper into the issue of temporality in the next section.

## Temporal flexibility and colonization of free time

Precarization imposes new time regimes (Hardt & Negri, 2009:146). In particular, the blurred lines between working time and free time are key for how self-precarization operates. As we saw in the last section, the desire to control one’s own time is important for the autonomy that many freelancers want. The temporal flexibility of digital freelancing can allow subjects an escape from the perceived drudgeries of employment, thus contributing to well-being (cf. Chung, 2022). It can also afford opportunities to balance duties of work and family life in ways that are more difficult within the confines of an “ordinary” job (Gregg, 2011). Yet the constant need to patchwork — including seeking more jobs, being ever-available to clients, marketing oneself online, updating social media, building portfolios, and managing one’s online presence — means that work often pours over into the free time of freelancers, and that free time can begin to resemble work.

Most interviewees express a strong desire to decide how much to work and when to do so. However, when asked how much they actually work, few could give clear estimations. It happened several times that interviewees laughed out loud at the question, as if the idea that their working hours could be measured was ridiculous. Where Swedish employment regulations stipulate that a work week for full-time employees is to be no longer than 40 hours (many collective agreements stipulate fewer hours than that), freelancers may, depending on their circumstances, work much more or much less than that. Participants estimated that they on average worked everything from 20 hours a week, to closer to 70–80 hours a week. Yet, such estimates are not very reliable, as the workload of freelancers is often shifting and dependent on seasonal variations and fluctuations in demand. A few interviewees kept track in Excel sheets of how much time they spent on

commissioned work, but these do not necessarily measure all the other necessary tasks for sustaining a freelance career, which are not compensated or typically thought of as “work”.

Generally speaking, digital freelancers have relatively much flexibility to decide when to work, even if this flexibility, as we saw in the last section, is restricted by various circumstances. How the participants structure their working days is also partly shaped by social relations and family obligations. Participants with families and children generally seem to stick closer to “ordinary” working hours in order to synchronize work with family life (cf. Rosa, 2016), albeit commonly stating that they also work extra during evenings and weekends to manage. Some saw this flexibility as freeing up more time to spend with their family or to take care of their children. This narrative was especially prevalent among my female participants. Content creator Eva, who was one of the participants with the most clearly structured working days, said that

Eva: I decide myself [when to work], but I still need to work at least my eight hours to manage everything. So, usually I work... I usually leave at school at half past eight. Then I start working at 9am and work until maybe 4 or 5pm. [But I like] that I’m not bound up. I don’t have to explain to anyone if I need to stay at home one day or pick my kid earlier or something. It’s nice that it’s up to me. I’d rather work extra hours in the evening or when they [her husband and child] are asleep instead. But I have no idea how many hours I *really* work.

Eva details how she could not really imagine having a job where she was “locked” to the same place, and part of the accounted reason for that was, as we see above, that she wants the flexibility to combine work with the demands of family life without being questioned by an employer. Previous research shows that it is indeed more common for women than men to choose a freelance career in order to balance demands from work and family (Chung, 2022), indicating this might be part of more general gendered patterns of reproductive work. While the flexibility afforded by a freelance career can be helpful in managing the conflicting demands from work and family, it can also reproduce gendered inequalities by “empowering” women to combine work with their “second shift” in the home (cf. Hochschild, 1997).

The tension between working time and free time is not only temporal but also related to spatial concerns. During the history of capitalism, work and free time have often been conceptualized spatially: work has been what is done in the factory or office, while free time is spent in or around the home, effectively making reproductive work, or so-called “women’s work”, invisible (Weeks, 2011). Not being employed, digital freelancers however have to create their own working space, whether this is at home, at a hired office, or somewhere else (at cafés, co-working spaces, public libraries, etc.). With platforms deterritorializing freelance markets and making them more global, work easily extends both spatially and temporally, losing its necessary connection to a specific time and place.



The “spatial extensification of work” (Pulignano & Morgan, 2022:10), by which work risks to overflow into other spaces of social life, comes with various subjective and affective consequences. For some, working from home was perceived as less stressful than having to commute to a workplace. However, this can also make it more difficult to disconnect from work and to distinguish work from free time — especially apparent for those interviewees working mainly from home. The graphic designer John, a married man in his 40s with children, reasoned that

John: I’ve been [working] from home all the time. I think it works well. Sure, I think the benefit of going to work and having an office can be that you go home [in the evening] and leave work there. It’s easier to switch on/off. For me, now, the office is upstairs, and then I go downstairs, and like, “Now I’ve stopped working”. But my thoughts are still on work for a long time before I’m able to wind down mentally.

The difficulties to disconnect from work and distinguish work from free time are experienced differently by the interviewees. For instance, dreams of making a living doing “what you love” and turning one’s hobby into a job, or one’s job into a hobby, guide many participants and seem to be important components when they form their professional subjectivities. Content creator Ylva, for instance, reflected on the overwork she did in the evenings:

Ylva: Most of the time, it’s fun. And also, now during the pandemic when there hasn’t been so much to do, I’ve felt that, yeah, others are knitting or whatever and I’m doing my [work-related] stuff. It’s become a bit of a mix of a hob and a jobby ... I mean a job and a hobby (laughs). But maybe “jobby” is the right word ... like a mixture of job and hobby.

The blurring of working time and leisure time that occurs when your hobby becomes a “jobby” means that many moments that typically are thought to be separate from work become productive. In line with wider “pleasure at work” discourses (McRobbie, 2016a), work is also reconfigured as something that is supposed to be fun and enjoyable. The tension between work time and free time is therefore not only a problem, as posited in contemporary mainstream debates of the “work–life balance” being skewed to one side or the other. In biopolitical terms, it is rather indicative of how work pours into life and of a more ambivalent process where the commons of everyday life infuse and give value to production by becoming part of the social factory (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). Separating work from non-work here becomes difficult, or even pointless. Photographer and content creator Alice expressed that she actively desires this conflation of work and life:

Daniel: From what you’ve said, it seems difficult separating work from free time? Is it tough that they float together so much?

Alice: For me, it’s not. Because it’s a way to live. [...] I’ve chosen an occupation where I ... I try to find that word I was looking for ...having a livelihood [Swe: *göra*

sitt leverne], or what do you say? Like living on life, you understand? (laughs) That sounds so *carpe diem*. God, that's corny. But a bit like that anyway. Like, why do I have to work with something boring just to be able to live? I want to live on living [Swe: *jag vill leva på att leva*]. And then it's not so difficult because, for me, they're not two separate things, work and life. They can be one.

Trying to verbalize her desire to “live on living”, Alice expresses a desire to de-alienate work. Her response can be contrasted to what Adorno in the essay *Free Time* calls the rigid and reified distinction between work and free time. Certainly writing in another age, Adorno argues that “in accordance with the predominant work ethic [...] work-less time, precisely because it is a mere appendage of work, is severed from the latter with puritanical zeal” (1991:190). Adorno writes that a then dominant “hobby ideology” posits that free time should be filled with hobbies — “preoccupations with which [one becomes] mindlessly infatuated merely in order to kill the time” (1991:188) and regain energy for work, preferably preoccupations manufactured and sold by the leisure industries. Such a rigid distinction cannot be said to hold today, especially not in situations where work and life intertwine. Digital freelancing rather amplifies a “domestication” of work, by which work becomes increasingly difficult to separate from life (see Armano & Murgia, 2017:53). We see this in Alice's ambition to erase the boundaries between work, life, and hobbies — an ambition that puts financial strains on her and her family, but that also provides her with a subjective sense of meaning.

Several participants without partners or children (mainly men) described leading quite bohemian lives, where they more or less willingly erase the boundaries between work and “life”. Historically, it has been more socially accepted for men than women to pursue bohemian lifestyles outside of the social norms that dictate the importance of childbearing and family life, as romantic conceptions of the “artistic subject” long have been connected to conceptions of male creativity (Wolff, 1981:43). Among my interviewees, several men seem to more or less willingly live alone without any family obligations so they fully can pursue their creative or entrepreneurial “calling”. Graphic designer Adam said,

Adam: When I wake up, there's really no “work time” and “not work time”. And that's how it is when you have your company — there's really no work time. Especially if your job is close to your hobby. I mean, I sit in front of the computer, I draw, paint, create web stuff. If I do it for myself or for a customer, it floats into each other. I like to work after eight o'clock in the evening when I'm relaxed and maybe don't have so much else to do. I might be watching some YouTube, and then be like “I'll just work on this logotype for a while”. I like to work during evenings. [...]

Daniel: Okay, so you have no, like, regular hours you try to stick to but rather work when it suits your mood? And let free time and work time float together pretty much?

Adam: Yes, except that I wake up before eight a.m. to be available [for communication]. I always try to be available between eight a.m. to five p.m. for all

customers. Sometimes I take a lie-in, it's not super strict. But also with weekends ... I have stopped thinking in terms of weekends since I was 23, I think. I have always had several jobs and weekend jobs, so yeah, I have no weekends. Either there's work, or there's no work.

While Adam does not stick to standard working hours but works both evenings and weekends, we see how the need to be available for communication with clients during regular office hours still creates pressure to adapt his availability to the demands of clients. The need to be constantly available even outside of office hours — during evenings, weekends, holidays, and vacations — has been further intensified by digital technologies that make us “always on” professionally, and pressures to continuously update social media platforms, as we saw in chapter 7.

Adam reflected that he had difficulties to fully disconnect from his work. When asked to estimate how much he works, he started by rhetorically responding, “Eh, can I include all the time I have anxiety between tasks? (laughs). And all the time I'm just thinking about work? Because that's also a part of the process”. With a laugh and a joking tone, Adam somewhat disarms the experience of feeling anxious in relation to his work, almost as if these affects are something to be expected. He went on to explain how it is difficult to clearly separate work and non-work:

Adam: So yeah, it's a lot. You think about work all the time, even when you do other things. So how much do I work? Sometimes it's eight hours I actively spend in some software, moving things around and designing stuff. Sometimes it's 12 hours mixed with those other things: I think about stuff, upload stuff, write emails, think about work also when I'm out walking, or in the evening. Sometimes it's really intense.

Constantly thinking about work was, for Adam, a source of stress and anxiety, which at one point pushed him to the brink of having burnout and now requires him to find strategies for coping with the psychological pressures of his work. In this way, self-precarization not only implies a self-*chosen* precarization but also a precarization of the self, as work becomes an affective “presence” that lingers in one's thoughts even when not actively working, causing a “constant sense of insecurity” (Read, 2022:279). Yet, Adam also expressed that his inability to stop thinking about work was not only a bad thing, but that it could also be exciting and pleasurable, being one of the most creative parts of his work. Self-precarization produces ambivalent affects: bursts of creativity co-exist with exhaustion, while excitement can easily flip over to anxiety, and vice versa.

A similar ambivalence is visible in my interview with Erik (illustrator, graphic designer). He told me that, for several years, he had struggled with sleeping problems and insomnia, partly caused by his habit of working late into the night. Yet, he expressed how thinking about work ideas when going to bed was a central part of creative process, almost letting ideas grow out of more subconscious processes.

Erik: I don't want to work too late, really. I have lots of respect for the fact that I've had insomnia, and if I work too late and have too much screen presence, it becomes difficult to sleep. So, I try to ... you know, work six hours. Then I might... if it's fun, I might work later than that. [...] And then when I go to bed, I think about how I can [go forward with my projects], and what other ideas I can come up with. Many ideas come when I close my eyes and rest, almost sleeping. That's my creative process, right before I go to sleep. That's some of the best moments, I love that.

For Erik, bedtime is not strictly for sleep but also a time to be productive: it is just before sleeping that his best ideas appear, and work-related problems may be solved. Other participants told me that they sleep with notebooks next to their beds in case they would wake up in the middle of the night with some great realization, and of the nice feeling of waking up in the morning with the solution to a problem they could not solve the day before. Fleming (2014a:34) calls this phenomenon "sleep work", highlighting how today's biopolitical mode of production blurs boundaries between production and even the most basic activities of reproduction, such as sleep.

When life becomes work and one's hobby becomes a jobby (to re-use Ylva's notion), work becomes a major object of affective investment. For some, this creates questions of what to do with one's time except to work. When I asked Olof (an illustrator in his 40s who lived alone and worked from his apartment) if he thought it was difficult to separate work from non-work, he answered:

Olof: Yes absolutely, absolutely. I've had to practice at that. Like, now it's five o'clock, now it's not normal to work any longer. A bit like that. And similarly, previously, I used to work weekends and such. But for several years, I didn't do that at all. Now I've started to do that [working weekends] a bit again. Because it's more fun to work than to do, like, nothing at all.

Daniel: Okay. So, your work is your hobby in a way? What you like to do for fun?

Olof: Yeah, it becomes a hobby, in a way. A little bit. So, you can take the opportunity to do some work stuff [during weekends], and maybe what you do gets a bit better as well if you're feeling well when you do it. So that you... instead of trying to... I tried to get Netflix and HBO and such. But I thought it was ... I find it really difficult to binge a series in a Sunday or whatever. I find it really weird. It just feels really dirty [Swe: *smutsig*] in a way. It's such a waste of life, in a way.

Contrasting his working habits to what he perceives to be "normal", we see how Olof negotiates perceived social norms of how to structure a working day. Olof's narrative somewhat echoes Fleming's (2014a:10) pessimistic observation that, for some workers today, "autonomous free time is experienced something like a black hole, and existential nothingness that evokes anxiety, sometimes anger and boredom, but mostly sadness". What Olof seems to perceive as a problem is not that he cannot find time to do things other than work. Rather, it is that his subjectivity is so strongly intertwined with his work that things outside of work have lost some of

their meaning, and that he cannot figure out what to do with his time other than work. Olof describes how this generates sensations of depression, meaninglessness, and feeling “dirty” when he is not working. Doing other things (here symbolized by binge watching a series on Netflix) becomes a waste not only of time but of life — a life which, for him, has become so intertwined with his professional subjectivity that it is difficult to discern any clear outside to it. His reproduction, relaxation, and regeneration seem to be achieved through work rather than in a sphere located outside of it (cf. Lorey, 2011:87).

Against more pessimistic readings, it is however important to acknowledge that Olof perceives his work as a very positive object of identification. Living without any partner or children, Olof seems to enjoy his daily routines as long as he can focus on his work. Yet, it was also clear from the interview that he struggled with the question of how to disconnect from work and how to best structure his days in the face of societal norms and expectations. Even taking a walk in the forest with a friend became an anxiety-inducing event, which, again, made him feel dirty:

Olof: It’s quite difficult to take time off, I think. I talked with a colleague the other day when we took a walk in the forest for three hours. And afterwards, we were both like, “Shit, it feels really dirty to take a walk in the forest in the middle of the day”. So, we just had to stop.

Daniel: Did you feel that you really should be working instead?

Olof: Yes, exactly, exactly. And then, when it’s weekend, there’s this idea that you’re absolutely not allowed to work. So, then it can be the opposite, that I just sit and feel like, “What the fuck should I do with this free time”. So I end up depressed instead. Maybe one should work a bit all the time [Swe: *jobba lite hela tiden*] instead.

From his narration, it seems like the difficulties of disconnecting from work is not what Olof thinks is the only problem, but also the social norms that set boundaries for when you are supposed to work and when to take time off. Again, challenging such norms around what a supposed good and balanced life is supposed to look like is important for opening up the possibilities for alternative lifestyles. Yet, staying on Olof’s reoccurring description of feeling dirty for doing other things than working points to the fact that this is not a process without its complications, as it for him renders activities not oriented toward productive ends anxiety-inducing.

In contrast to Olof who wants to “work a bit all the time”, others see freelancing as providing opportunities to work *less* in order to set aside free time for other things. Compared to a contemporary work ethic that posits enterprise itself as a core object of desire (cf. Bröckling, 2016), some hoped freelancing could enable a life less defined by work. However, taking time off puts financial pressures on freelancers. While Swedish employment regulations and collective agreements, for instance, give most employees the right to at least four weeks of paid vacation, freelancers

must balance taking time off with commitments to clients. They must also put away money for such periods themselves, which not everyone can afford.

For those who can afford it, work-reduction can, however, be one form of resistance against a stressful and colonizing working life (Norbäck, 2021a). This can involve desires of not having a “regular” job or of working less overall, approaching freelancing as a kind of downshifting. Graphic designer Lizabeth said that “my ambition is not to get rich on my company or anything. [...] My ambition is to have as much free time as I want. And to have a decent salary as well. I earned decent money last year, but that was the first time”. Erik similarly told me that “I wouldn’t say I’m an exemplary entrepreneur or anything. I’ve entered this with the mindset that I just want to chill (laughs)”. As Erik lived alone and told me he did not want to have a family or kids, he could support himself even during periods when he had little income. Nevertheless, he feared that “I’ll probably become a poor pensioner [Swe: *fattigpensionär*] (laughs). It feels like all freelancers will, sooner or later”.

Others express that their desire to work less became practically impossible due to the need to make enough money. Content creator Matilda, living with a husband and one child, told me that she currently had to work every day of the week in order to make ends meet, but that she hoped she could reduce her workload in the future:

Matilda: I have this explicit ambition for myself ... probably it will take a while for me to get there. But my ambition is not to continue working seven days a week, like now. My ambition is to work four days a week. So that means that when I price my projects, I must be able to cover for that. It is my ambition to work four days a week and be able to live off that, and also to have a fifth day where I can do random projects for myself that I feel like doing.

Resembling what we have seen throughout the previous chapters, imagining a future where Matilda can work both less and more autonomously, while still earning enough money, motivates her to keep going in the present. Currently, the desire to be in control over her working time paradoxically drives her into a situation of chronic overwork, with no promises that she will necessarily have more control over her workload in the future. Yet, hope here functions as a powerful frame for making sense of her situation and, as Alacovska (2019:1123) puts it, find “purpose and a reason to act in precarious conditions”. A similar tension is, to summarize, visible through all the stories of the respondents. While the tension takes different forms, their stories often contain similar dreams and desires to be free to decide over one’s own time, coupled with different potential paradoxes, disappointments, or disillusionment in cases where things do not play out as planned.

## Community and competition

The final tension of self-precarization that I want to highlight arises through the social relations between freelancers and how they view each other. Competition and community, I argue, provide two oppositional logics for how digital freelancers form their subjectivities and cope with precarious employment, which can both resist and reinforce neoliberal subjectivities.

Within immaterial and biopolitical forms of production, value is captured from productive processes organized outside of capitalist command. On one hand, as we have seen in the previous chapters, the platform economy increases competition between freelancers through its reliance on atomized precarious labor and competitive algorithmic metrics of performance (Chicchi, 2022). On the other hand, the reliance within this mode of production on self-organization and self-government of workers outside of direct organizational and managerial control means that workers have the opportunity to form networks of cooperation independently and to create community-based commons and knowledge that can benefit the wider freelancer community (Alacovska, 2022). This is what Hardt and Negri (2009:290) see as the positive and oppositional potential of biopolitical labor: of forming autonomous cooperation and community based in genuine care and solidarity, which might produce new forms of life outside the dictates of capital.

Competition, a social process which long has interested sociologists, is famously characterized by Simmel (1964) as an indirect form of conflict where parties fight over scarce resources that none of them have. Some participants embrace and identify with a competitive logic, through which other freelancers are seen largely as competitors to out-perform rather than as colleagues or collaborators. Some draw heavily on meritocratic discourses, by which getting ahead in the competition and managing to sustain a precarious career becomes an indication of individual achievements and successful performances compared to competitors in the field. We see this in this excerpt from the interview with graphic designer Adam:

Adam: Those that succeed in the long run are those that hang on and try to improve themselves. The best thing you can do is to be so fucking good that people can't turn a blind eye to you. Those that look for quality and work on a higher level, they will [...] find you. Because there aren't very many people who do really great stuff either.

By reasoning that there are not very many good freelancers out there and that you *will* be found and hired by attractive clients if you are just good enough, Adam reproduces an understanding of labor market successes and failures as largely a result of individual talent and achievement. Meritocracy is another technology of the self (cf. Foucault, 1988a), which legitimizes labor market outcomes as fair and just. For Adam, this competitive logic has the function of boosting his self-confidence and of forming his subjectivity as a competent and professional creator — as someone who has earned his relative success on his own merits and hard work.

This way of reasoning furthermore normalizes precarious working conditions; Adam said that he tries “to see things realistically”, which here means to acknowledge that precarity is unavoidable and that you can only work on and improve yourself to increase the chances of getting ahead. In this, the logic of meritocracy can be coupled with a certain cynicism, described by Virno (2007:7) as an affective attitude that makes “a virtue out of necessity” and that, in the “demise of the principle of equivalence manifests itself in the cynic’s conduct as the impatient abandonment of the demand for equality”.

For others who position themselves against similar discourses of meritocratic competition, but who fail to live up to their perceived ideals, such discourses can produce feelings of inadequacy. Meritocracy is coupled with technologies of self-responsibilization and self-blame, by which not only successes but also failures are individualized (Scharff, 2016). The photographer, Susanne, said a couple of times that she felt “completely worthless” for struggling to support herself. Similarly, the graphic designer, Therese, told me how she used to compare herself to other freelancers who she imagines get offered much more work than her because they are “better” than her. She describes not having many commissions as shameful:

Therese: It’s a bit shameful not to have commissions. It’s a bit ... everyone else seems so successful. Everyone has many clients, many commissions. So, to admit that you don’t have anything, it ... it feels very problematic. I don’t want to expose myself (laughs). [...] Because it’s like, “Why don’t you get any commissions? Because you’re so fucking bad”. That’s what you think when you’re alone at your chamber.

Lacking a social context for her freelancing and a workplace or colleagues who can counter-balance her negative thoughts when working alone leads Therese to consider her difficulties as reflective of her own shortcomings and of being bad at her work, which makes her blame herself (cf. Banks, 2007:62). Therese seems to occupy a difficult position in the tension of community and competition: not being able to turn competition into a resource that she can use to anchor and strengthen her subjectivity and career, but also lacking the social networks and communities that can provide solidarity and support. However, Therese reflected on social media platforms like LinkedIn, and particularly, Facebook groups as allowing her to get in contact with other friendly freelancers, which could offset some of her more negative thoughts. She described how, especially during the pandemic, many other freelancers suddenly opened up about their struggles and difficulties on these platforms:

Therese: When you start to notice that others are actually struggling too, then it becomes a bit easier. Then you can say, “It’s not only because *I’m* bad”. Some have an easier time because they have the right personality and are good sellers. Or some have better networks. It’s all about the people you have around yourself. If you’re unlucky and don’t have friends in your sector, things become more difficult [...]



Although Therese said that she lacks close networks that can help her, just re-imagining other freelancers as struggling colleagues in a similar position as herself allows Therese to drop some of her self-criticism and to envision somewhat more social explanations for her difficulties. This way, she can envision herself as part of communities of like-minded freelancers rather than seeing everyone else as atomized competitors. Moisander et al. (2018:390) characterize community mobilization as a technology of biopower that can “offset or nullify the possibly destructive effects of the logic of competition”, thus making precarious market-mediated work more acceptable. However, while imagining oneself as part of wider communities can make insecure work bearable, reframing competing freelancers as part of one’s community is not only an insidious scheme of power; it can also allow more solidaric subjectivities to take shape (see Norbäck, 2021a).

Not having a workplace can create a sense of isolation. Quite a few participants expressed that, while they to a degree might enjoy isolating themselves to get into a creative “flow”, the individual responsibility to find enough work and to manage a company is challenging. Designer Nils, who, as we saw earlier, had moved to Northern Sweden to freelance, reflected over his work situation:

Nils: It’s very difficult to find sounding boards to whom you can ventilate and say, “Okay, I have these challenges [to make money]. What the fuck should I do?” So, there’s loneliness, stress, insecurity. And there are periods when you feel like giving up (laughs). Because it just feels so grand and hopeless.

Lacking colleagues and networks that can help him forward left Nils feeling lonely and disillusioned, with the situation appearing “grand and hopeless”. Similar to Therese, Nils said that support platforms can provide an antidote to the loneliness he felt. He told me that while his marketing strategy initially had been very focused on Instagram, LinkedIn, and labor platforms — platforms he described as focused on instrumental business exchanges and narcissistic self-promotion — he had lately started to see the value of Facebook groups, where he expressed there is “more honest communication” and community-building:

I have a very positive experience from it. LinkedIn is pretty boring really, it’s very work-related. Instagram is more like, “Look at me, look at me, look at what I’ve done, I’m so good”. But you don’t give much back. [...] On Instagram, it’s a lot like that, everyone just takes, but it’s not much giving back. But on Facebook, it’s a lot of giving and taking, I think.

During the interview, when reflecting on his work situation, it seemed like Nils gradually came to the realization that he should spend less time on platforms that he experiences as purely instrumental, and instead spend more time in communities where he thought there was a genuine solidarity between freelancers who both give and take from each other. Nils reasoned this could be a way to counter-balance the isolation he felt as a freelancer. In this way, social media platforms can function as

what Jodi Dean (2010) calls “affective networks”, which, through the circulation of communication and content, at least can provide *feelings* of community, if not always actually formalized communities.

Others reflected on the importance of geographical networks. Graphic designer Lizabeth said that she was part of a consultancy agency, where she meets other consulting freelancers who she sometimes works together with to combat feelings of isolation. Some said they liked to work together with friends who also freelance, to similarly feel that they are not alone in their situation. Others tried to counter-balance loneliness by working at co-working spaces or hiring shared offices. Filmmaker and photographer Marcus contrasted his freelance career to when he worked at a bureau, saying he missed having people around him: “That’s the biggest minus for when you’re not out [filming]. [...] Like, editing and the administrative stuff, it gets very lonely”. He continued,

Marcus: You very easily get stuck in yourself. And like, work very much on your own. The social aspects disappear a bit, compared to if you have a workplace. So, you have to work with that. It’s fun to work in teams and such, so maybe I should do that more in the future. Try to work more with others and not only think, “Nah, I can do this myself”. To see the value of having more people involved.

Daniel: You also said that you think about working more from the bureau [which Marcus sometimes did commissions for]. Is that also to get more of the social aspects?

Marcus: Yeah, that’s part of it. It’s fun sitting in an office and have people around you, even if you do your own individual stuff, just to being able to speak to people. And not being stuck in your little nest [...] [which gets] very lonely.

Marcus further expressed that he would like to hire an office space that he could share with other freelancers, but that he did not have the financial means to do so right now. For freelancers, not having “the social aspects disappear” is not only a question of having the right networks and social capital but also a financial question, such as being able to pay for a workspace or a place in business networks (cf. Merkel, 2018). In accounting for the need to move beyond thinking, “Nah, I can do this myself” and to instead work closer to other freelancers, Marcus articulates alternatives to the most atomized forms of freelance work.

The filmmaker Patrik also argued for the importance of seeing other freelancers as colleagues and friends rather than competitors. Cultural labor markets benefit from a kind of *quid pro quo* logic, he reasoned. As an example, he talked about how he is happy to lend out his equipment for free to other freelancers he knows, and that he and others in his network sometimes pass on commissions to each other:

Patrik: I do own quite some technological equipment, so it’s better that it’s used [by lending it out] than that it’s just laying here. But that’s based on that I know the people. And then maybe I can borrow something from them when I need it. [...]

There is such a side which is good. We help each other, because we are all in the same boat. That's what you must remember [as a freelancer]. What drives me here is that I know that there is basically no cultural freelancer who doesn't ... everyone is just as insecure. So why not help each other when you can?

Daniel: Mm, I see! Can there be any conflict there, if you also compete over the same jobs?

Patrik: Yes, there is that side too. But ... yeah, it can happen that people get asked for the same commission, like people you know. [...] But for me it hasn't [resulted in any major problems]. Rather, sometimes we give commissions to each other. Like, maybe I get a commission that could as well have gone to someone else. But if I can't do it, I know other people I can pass it on to, who can do it as good as I can.

Daniel: Is that type of network important for you?

Patrik: Yes, the network is almost the most important, I would say. Those that don't work with their networks but only think about their own niche, they, like, lose contact with their networks. So, of course there is a competitive situation too, but it hasn't happened to me that me and someone I know are fighting over the exact same commission and must sell ourselves for the same job. That hasn't happened to me.

Reflecting that freelancers are “in the same boat” and face the same precarious situation, Patrik argues that it is important to help each other to reduce the pressures and risks they all face. While acknowledging that freelance markets are competitive, he frames this as a collective problem that freelancers must deal with together rather than working against each other. Giving commissions to each other rather than clinging on to them yourself points to the formation of solidaric subjectivities and modes of working based in care and compassion rather than neoliberal, individualistic competition (Alacovska, 2020). Sharing resources and equipment can furthermore be seen as a form of “commoning”, which challenges the privatization and enclosure of resources for purely commercial purposes by instead using them for cooperation and non-commodified reciprocal exchange (cf. Hardt & Negri, 2009).

## Concluding remarks

This chapter has explored how precarious work is negotiated, normalized, and given meaning. To this end, I have adapted the concept of self-precarization (Lorey, 2011, 2015), with the aim to nuance and ground the concept in an ethnographic understanding of the lived experiences of workers. I argue that the concept of self-precarization helps us understand the precarious labor market as an increasingly normalized condition that individuals come to form their lives and subjectivities in

relation to. I show how subjectivity is not only a result but also a driver of precarization. Contributing with knowledge on how this occurs for digital freelancers in Sweden, the chapter has identified five subjective tensions of self-precarization: choice and necessity, self-realization and self-exploitation, autonomy and constraint, temporal flexibility and colonization of free time, and community and competition.

These tensions should not be read as dichotomous poles, where experiences can be neatly categorized as one or the other. Rather, a central conclusion is that self-precarization simultaneously involves positive and negative elements that easily “flip over” into its opposite. The desire to make a living on one’s passions, to escape alienating work, or to turn work into a hobby are here intrinsically connected with biopolitical and affective elements such as burnout, sleeplessness, anxiety, work-related stress, and tendencies for work to colonize social life.

The identified tensions show how subjectivation is contradictory and ambivalent. While discursive articulations of the “entrepreneurial self” or the “passionate cultural worker” might picture these as relatively coherent subjects, there is no such thing as a singular digital freelance subject that embodies all these discourses and qualities. A subject might pivot back and forth between understanding their work situation as freely opted in for or forced upon them, or experience these poles at the same time, simultaneously. In laboring subjects, as in all subjects, there is a coexistence of contraries that we only come close to by studying ethnographically how technologies of domination and subjection “hit the ground” in the negotiations of real people.

The chapter shows how self-precarization can make subjects feel empowered in a contingent situation where they often have little actual control, or make them embrace opportunistic attempts at turning precarious conditions to their advantage (cf. Virno, 2003). Other times, self-precarization can reflect a cruelly optimistic attachment (Berlant, 2011) that makes subjects disillusioned and cynical, blaming themselves for their circumstances or failures. The chapter also highlights instances when precarious work is contested, challenged, resisted, and critiqued. Yet, similar to what is identified in previous research (Norbäck, 2021a), resistance is often ambivalent in my material. Voicing ideology critique, making an exit from the world of freelancing, creating solidarity and community with other freelancers, turning private resources into shared commons, and freeing up time for family and friends are some of the elements of resistance in my data. Even if these elements do not challenge the precarious structures of digital markets, they contain seeds for challenging the responsabilization of workers and imagine the potential of digital freelancing to materialize as genuinely “good work”. I will come back to these questions in the next and final chapter, where I discuss the main conclusions of the thesis and reflect on some ways forward.



# Chapter 9. Conclusions

Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and build up what we could be to get rid of this kind of political ‘double bind’, which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures. (Foucault, 1982:785)

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This thesis began with three vignettes describing the working experiences of Adam, Therese, and Sara, three digital freelancers who we have gotten more familiar with throughout these pages, along with several others. I stated in the introduction that their stories not only highlight heterogeneous individual experiences of cultural work in the platform economy but also point to overlapping patterns and broader trends on the labor market today. In this final chapter, I come back to these broader patterns by discussing what the results of the thesis say about today’s labor market, the subjects active within it, and possible futures of work.

The chapter starts with a summary of the main findings. Then, I outline the main theoretical and empirical contributions. Finally, with a nod to Foucault’s reflection above, I discuss alternatives to precarious freelance work in the Swedish cultural industries. If this thesis has largely been concerned with discovering who an imaginary “we” are today — the figure of digital freelancers — the difficult task remains to construct counter-narratives that can challenge discourses that construct precarious work as a self-evident normality and the center of meaning.

## Findings: The formation of digital freelance subjects

The aim of the thesis has been to understand how digital freelance subjects are formed as a category of labor. Different dimensions of this process have been analyzed through a theoretical framework combining Marxian and Foucauldian understandings of labor, subjectivity, and precarization. I have argued for an approach that centers on the subjective reasonings and negotiations of freelancers and have, for this reason, analyzed empirical material collected through interviews and digital ethnography. In this first section, I briefly summarize the main arguments and findings in relation to the four research questions. I also discuss how they, taken together, illuminate the contours of the digital freelancer subject.

## Returning to the research questions

The first research question was: *How do digital freelancers navigate the platform economy in order to manage precarity and make a living?*

The case of digital freelancers illustrates some of the impact that platforms have on independent, highly skilled, white-collar workers in Sweden. I show how labor platforms like Upwork and Fiverr create global competition in which Swedish freelancers may have difficulties to compete due to the comparatively high costs of living in Sweden. Instead, other types of platforms, often discounted in the sociology of work literature, are more important for them. By enabling atypical avenues for income and making freelancers dependent on ever-shifting, unpredictable algorithms and fluctuating digital trends, the thesis finds that digital platforms lead to labor fragmentation, which I argue is expressive of the multiplication of labor in platform capitalism (cf. Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). The analytical chapters show how workers respond to this fragmentation by diversifying their skills and income streams, and by engaging in multi-platform practices. Through interviews and digital observations, I have been able to get close to these practices to produce detailed ethnographic accounts of how digital freelancers make a living by combining diverse types of platforms for different purposes.

In chapter 5, I introduce the concept of *patchworking* to study how workers manage their freelance careers by figuratively stitching together patchworks of income from diverse income sources, established over different interconnected platforms. I frame patchworking as both a result of, and a response to, labor fragmentation and precarity. By patchworking, freelancers can manage themselves, grasp opportunities, and temporarily immunize themselves against precarity. However, the need to engage in patchworking also increases their workload and makes them susceptible to lofty promises of platform apparatuses, which often fail to materialize into sustainable incomes.

Patchworking contributes to the formation of a kind of worker subject that fits the demands of contemporary capitalism well. As a technology of the self, patchworking governs the self to be flexible, adaptable, opportunistic, ever-available, and multi-skilled. By having “to be eight roles in one”, as one participant put it, occupational identities risk being fragmented too. This has implications for the self-understandings of workers that are important to consider in future research, especially if patchworking practices become more common in other sectors too.

The second research question was: *How is digital freelancing entangled with the performance of unpaid work, and how are boundaries between paid and unpaid work negotiated, normalized, and given meaning?*

Chapter 6 shows how unpaid and underpaid work is accounted for and justified by digital freelancers in Sweden, a national context with comparatively high costs of living. While, in my data, it is normalized as necessary and unavoidable to work for free or for little money — all interviewees have done so — their reasonings are full of ambivalences and moral distinctions for when it is legitimate or not. The

normalization of unpaid labor is thus often coupled with a critique of exploitative clients and circumstances, as well as alternative logics that attach other frames of value to (unpaid) cultural work than those that are economic.

Pressure to work for free is, in my material, nonetheless often framed as a kind of investment in the self, which legitimates providing free or underpaid labor in exchange for future-oriented promises of experience, exposure, online ratings, and employability. These results align with theories of hope labor (cf. Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013; Duffy, 2017), but provide novel perspectives on how such future-oriented logics function as technologies of subjectivation in the context of platform capitalism that fuel distinct forms of platform entrepreneurialism.

The thesis shows how platformization enlarges the already-existing scope of unpaid work that cultural freelancers must do to manage their careers. Labor platforms contribute to global competition and price dumping, and adds metric-based incentives to do unpaid work to build a reputation. Needs to build a digital portfolio and get exposure also make digital freelancers engage in both formal and informal unpaid labor. The theoretical perspectives on biopolitics and the social factory (Virno, 2003; Hardt & Negri, 2009; Fleming, 2014a) have allowed me to conceptualize how this has implications beyond doing uncompensated work. A finding which goes through all chapters is that this blurs boundaries between work time and free time, so much that it can be difficult to say what work even is and to distinguish an outside to it. Several interviewees express that they “always work” and that they “think of work all the time”, thus orienting life itself towards work.

One central form of unpaid, future-oriented work explored in the thesis is self-branding. The third question was: *How do digital freelancers brand and market themselves in an algorithmic, multi-platform environment?* Chapter 7 identifies different imperatives for digital workers to put their selves to market on platforms. I show how imaginaries of how to best promote the self and respond to platform algorithms are produced both by platform apparatuses and within freelance communities. Platformization makes it necessary to build cross-platform brands, all while researching particular algorithms, affordances, and user cultures.

I argue that self-branding functions as yet another kind of investment in the self that workers can make by promoting themselves as commodities through digital platforms. In line with the wider consumer culture, this involves a balancing act of simultaneously thinking about the self as unique and standardizable, or authentic and calculated. Self-branding on platforms prompts workers to invest considerable amounts of their affects, subjectivity, and everyday life into branded digital performances, and to develop algorithmic niches and modes of engagement that cater to particular platforms and algorithms. This can produce various tensions and cracks in how digital freelancers perceive themselves.

It is argued that self-branding represents an individualized solution to systemic precarity. It makes workers actively participate on platforms with no guarantees of sustainable incomes. As a form of self-governing, making workers rely on their self-brands as measures of their labor market value contributes to strongly meritocratic



conceptions of work. However, these may not correspond to how income opportunities actually are distributed in algorithm-powered digital markets.

The fourth research question was: *How is precarious work negotiated, accounted for, justified, and challenged by digital freelancers when they form their subjectivities?* This question is most directly answered in chapter 8. By focusing on the interviewee's own accounts, I bring out the nuances in how they negotiate precarity and uncertainty. I identify five tensions in how they negotiate precarious work: choice and necessity, self-realization and self-exploitation, autonomy and constraint, temporal flexibility and colonization of free time, and community and competition. All these tensions illustrate high degrees of ambivalence in how digital freelancers identify with their work, with competing and sometimes contradictory accounts and explanations often co-existing somewhat harmoniously.

I also show how different imaginaries of work function as discursive resources and cultural repertoires, which freelancers use when negotiating their subjectivities. With recourse to various ideas of freedom, autonomy, and self-realization, they can make their work understandable and justifiable, even when it involves elements like insecurity, overwork, stress, and anxiety. By doing so, they however also normalize and embrace precarious work and individualized responsibility as a new normal. Some describe themselves as weird, abnormal, or depressing for wanting stable, secure careers, while others talk about risk and uncertainty as exciting and desirable, internalizing market success and failure as purely individual achievements. This illustrates an individualist form of work ethic which is different to the traditionally collectivist Swedish work ethic. Even those who state that they have willingly opted in for insecure freelance careers because they like the “adventure” typically have work-related experiences of burnout, stress, anxiety, and fear of poverty. The stories freelancers tell themselves about their situation and their choices allow them to construct coherent subjectivities in the face of uncertainty, but also open up for alternative imaginaries of work.

### **Putting the pieces together: The contours of the digital freelancer**

The research questions add different pieces to the contours of the digital freelancer as a figure of labor (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). Careers of patchworking push them to embrace diversification, multi-skilling, and multi-platform practices; demands to work for little money as a future-oriented investment blurs boundaries between work and free time and puts costs onto workers; ubiquitous needs to market the self requires workers to put their skills, subjectivities and emotions to market, and align them with the algorithms and affordances of particular platforms; and values of freedom, autonomy, self-realization, and creativity can drive freelancers to normalize or embrace risk and uncertainty, even when it leads to burnout, anxiety, and everyday life becoming thoroughly centered around work.

The digital freelancer is a porous hybrid-figure (cf. Murgia & Pulignano, 2021) of entrepreneur and precarious worker. It is placed in between economic and cultural

fields and values, where it blurs the lines between work and life and displays both autonomy and subordination. Far from being an internally coherent category of subjects, digital freelancer can themselves be seen as a patchwork of diverse influences, tensions, structural forces, and cultural imaginaries. These elements materialize differently in the subjectivities of particular individuals, but also point to distinct patterns that highlight the sociological processes through which social and cultural contexts shape subjectivity, and vice versa.

I argue that the large variation in my sample has mainly been a strength for the study, as it has allowed me to identify commonalities in the practices and reasonings of a heterogeneous hybrid-group of workers. The purpose of qualitative research is not statistical generalization, but to get close to social phenomena in order to nuance the theoretical understanding of them. The ethnographic approach has allowed me to show how the practices the interviewees have told me about occur and unfold on platforms, and how the discursive and cultural repertoires they use to account for their experiences are reproduced and shared online. I have been able to make distinctions in how workers navigate and negotiate the situations they find themselves in visible, to explore how personal accounts of work experiences relate to the formation of subjectivities, and to bring forward the participants' perspectives on ongoing social transformations.

While I cannot make any grand generalizations about digital freelancers as a population from my sample, there are aspects that all the participants wrestle with that reasonably also affect other hybrid, high-skill, white-collar workers in similar positions and industries in Sweden. Approached as a case that highlights transformative processes on labor markets today, I think digital freelancers can be seen as a tendential case in the way Hardt and Negri speak of it:

In any economic system there are numerous different forms of labor that exist side by side, but there is always one figure of labor that exerts hegemony over the others. This hegemonic figure serves as a vortex that gradually transforms other figures to adopt its central qualities. The hegemonic figure is not dominant in quantitative terms but rather in the way it exerts a power of transformation over others. Hegemony here designates a tendency (Hardt & Negri, 2005:107).

While I certainly do not view digital freelancers as a hegemonic figure of labor, they do seem to embody at least some elements of work that today exert normative transformative pressures on other groups of workers too (cf. also Sennett, 2007). They reflect discursive and cultural shifts, by which insecurity no longer is seen as a major threat to the center of society but rather as part of the governing and self-governing of its middle layers (Lorey, 2015): while their work often is badly paid, insecure, and requires intensive work of self-marketization, it is simultaneously often framed as meaningful, self-chosen, and a major point of identification, reflecting wider ideals of self-realization and autonomy through independent work. The Covid-19 pandemic has arguably accelerated this too, normalizing some of the working conditions freelancers have long had — remote work from home, flexible

working patterns, working alone, communicating over platforms — for employees in other sectors too (Hiselius & Arnfalk, 2021; Asatiani & Nordström, 2023).

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the heterogeneity of my sample also has certain weaknesses. As a catchall hybrid term, the category of digital freelancers collapses sometimes quite different backgrounds, experiences, and sectoral differences into one figure. Some results speak mainly to ongoing processes in cultural and artistic fields. Other findings engage with more general discussions about freelance work — where my sample might differ from, say, highly paid freelancers and consultants in the IT and tech sectors — or speak to debates on the gig economy, where digital freelancers have quite different positionalities than the stereotypical gig worker engaged in low-skilled service work. Furthermore, the Swedish context matters for how the results should be interpreted.

Keeping this in mind, I will next turn to some of the central contributions and implications of my results, as well as which fields of inquiry they relate to, and what they indicate about society and culture today.

## Contributions: The implications of the study

This thesis contributes with empirically rich and theoretically informed knowledge on how precarious work is lived with, negotiated, and normalized today by digital freelancers active in the Swedish cultural industries. Through my methodological and theoretical approach, I add original perspectives to the literature on precarization by juxtaposing theoretical concepts like self-precarization, biopower, and immaterial labor — concepts that often have operated on a philosophical rather than sociological level of abstraction — with qualitative sociological research grounded in the concrete everyday lives of workers. Just as these concepts give meaning to my empirical data and make it appear in a certain theoretical light, the qualitative ethnographic approach gives empirical nuance to theoretical debates that are sometimes disconnected from real people.

### **An ethnographic focus on self-precarization and subjectivation**

To understand what precarization entails for digital freelancers in Sweden, I have adopted the concept of *self-precarization* (Lorey, 2011, 2015). The four research questions address not only different elements of the subject formation of digital freelancers, but also, by extension, aspects of the self-precarization processes by highlighting both objective and subjective elements (Alberti et al., 2018) that shape the digital freelancer as a category of laboring subjects.

This study nuances and advances the sociological understanding of self-precarization by approaching the normalization of precarious work as always situated in concrete settings, personal biographies, particular platforms, rhetorical

vocabularies, and socially anchored practices. Through this approach, I have shed light on the two dimensions of self-precarization that I have identified: First, on precarization as self-*chosen*, expressed through the ambivalent negotiations of the participants by which they give their subjectivities coherence. Second, I also show the precarization *of* the self that occurs in digital freelancing. This produces a self that is required to be always on, always working, always on the lookout for new income opportunities, and that takes risks and responsibilities onto itself.

Precarization risks becoming a faceless process with agency of its own if it is not anchored in the lived experience of people. Precarious subjects do not simply mirror a world of work that has become precarious, but rather, to quote Papadopoulos and Stephenson (2008:231), they “are the fluid substance through which labour is reorganized, in which precarity materialises [and] the ground on which the embodied experience of precarity is lived”. Exploring the formation of subjectivity ethnographically helps us identify the concrete effects of precarization on the everyday lives and subjectivities of workers, who adapt to and manage themselves against it, but who also reproduce and challenge it through their actions. This has allowed me to argue and show that subjectivity is not only a result of precarization but also a vehicle for it.

A related contribution of the thesis is to the growing *ethnographic literature on governmentality and subject formation* (see Moisander et al., 2018; Norbäck, 2021a, 2021b; Hansen Löfstrand & Jacobsson, 2022). The study increases our understanding of how the psychic and affective life in platform capitalism (cf. Scharff, 2016; Krce-Ivančić, 2018; Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2020; cf. Butler, 1997) is lived out and accounted for by actors themselves, in the context of Sweden. Rather than assuming that attempts by authorities to shape subjectivity have certain effects, I have stressed the need to explore the processes by which subjects negotiate being governed. Discovering the “entrepreneurial”, “precarious”, or “creative” subject is, from such a perspective, never an end-point but rather a starting point for exploring the empirical nuances of subject formation and how these processes produce not only sameness but also difference and resistance (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). This gives a better understanding of how technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988a) operate in practice and of the often ambivalent and contradictory results of subject formation.

## **Digital freelancing in a Swedish context**

Approaching precarious labor as a new normality is not to claim that it is experienced the same by different groups of workers (Alberti et al., 2018; Choonara et al., 2022). More specifically, the thesis contributes to the understanding of *precarization among digital freelancers in a Swedish context*. While precarization is often still assumed to exist “at the margins” of society (Vosko, 2011), especially so, perhaps, in a Nordic context with universalistic welfare ambitions (see Ilsøe et al., 2021), I have shown how precarious labor is insinuating itself as a normality

also among highly skilled, white-collar, middle-class workers in Sweden. Sweden is often recognized by its history of labor collectivism, high levels of unionization, and extensive collective agreements. While some have argued that these facts could make entrepreneurial subjectivity more of an anomaly in Sweden (Norbäck, 2021b), the study shows how entrepreneurial rationalities, which individualize the experience of work by normalizing competitive and insecure careers as attractive, have insinuated themselves also in this context. These findings have implications for the future of work in Sweden.

Imaginarities of Sweden as a universalistic welfare state that protects its citizens from market forces still exist. Digital freelancers, like other groups of atypical workers, challenge such imaginaries. With the institutions of the Swedish model being built around full-time employment, workers who are impelled to seek out commission-based and alternative incomes through digitalized marketplaces may, as we have seen in examples throughout these pages, fall between the cracks by not being eligible for unemployment benefits, sick pay, occupational pensions, and other benefits originally designed for workers with full-time employment.

If precarious careers of platform work continue to be presented as a new desirable normal, it might contribute to trends of polarization and segmentation on the Swedish labor market (cf. Berglund & Ulfsson, 2024; Banasiak & Jesnes, 2024), where high-skilled workers from the middle classes are also drawn into insecure independent careers. Despite paying taxes and contributing to the common welfare just as employed workers do, Swedish freelancers cannot count on the welfare state to protect them if things do not turn out as planned. Furthermore, freelancers and others who negotiate their own employment contracts cannot enjoy the relative security still afforded to employees through Swedish employment regulations and collective agreements. This does not only create injustice between workers with and without employment but might also incentivize employers to contract freelancers or gig workers, within or outside Sweden, to avoid employment regulations and put costs and responsibilities on workers. In a longer perspective, this may challenge the legitimacy of the Swedish model, oriented toward the negotiation of the labor market parties rather than legislation (Bucht, 2022). If the Swedish model is to deliver on its universalist promises, it must be updated so that it also covers workers with non-standard forms of employment.

### **Patchworking, digital governmentality, and platform entrepreneurialism**

Another related set of conversations that the thesis contributes to are those about the *platformization of cultural work*. I have argued for the importance of a broader perspective on the platformization of work which does not overstate the importance of labor platforms specifically. Despite that previous research shows that digital labor platforms (like Uber, Foodora, or Upwork) still are quite marginal phenomena that account for a small percentage of labor market transactions (Fleming et al., 2019; Larsen & Ilsøe, 2021), case studies of such platforms are abundant.

As discussed earlier, one of my contributions to this literature comes through the concept of *patchworking*. With this concept, I have argued for the value of analyzing the practices by which workers build a multi-platform presence and patch together a living from many different income streams. In this, the thesis adds to the emerging literature on multi-platform practices among cultural workers, freelancers, and gig workers (Scolere, 2019; Cunningham and Craig, 2019; Hair et al., 2022).

Putting sociology in debate with research in media studies and cultural studies on platform work can give a better understanding of the role of platformization today. As I have shown through my combination of interviews and observations, while digital freelancers need not necessarily use labor platforms to find gigs and commissions, they are often thoroughly dependent on other kinds of platforms to secure income alternative streams, market and brand the self, network, build digital reputations, and so on. This points toward a post-wage society (Chicchi, 2022; Alacovska, 2022), where fragmented multiple job-holding and gig work is combined with various non-waged income streams and side-hustles secured through different types of platforms (Thieme, 2018; Ens & Márton, 2021; Ravenelle, 2023). In this context, future discussions about the gigification of work (Barratt et al., 2022) need to take into account the various types of platforms and business models that push workers towards non-standard, hybrid, and fragmented income streams.

I have explored and theorized patchworking and platformization in relation to discussions of *digital governmentality* (Barry, 2019; Dammann, 2022; Uysal, 2022). Through algorithms, reputation-driven systems, and affordances, I argue that platforms have become new instruments of governing. By conceptualizing digital platforms as apparatuses, and by studying the interactions between them and digital freelancers, I add knowledge on how governmentality and subject formation occur in an increasingly digitalized world, where platforms and algorithms orient and steer our actions.

I maintain that platform apparatuses have become important instruments for the production of subjectivity. Data-driven and algorithmic forms of governmentality produce, channel, and direct flows of human affect and desire, thus steering subject formation toward certain (often economically productive) ends (Celis Bueno, 2017:167). Digital freelancers are shaped by this, but they, in turn, also contribute to the subjectivation processes of others through their own performances online, which channel the desire of others in different directions that are not pre-figured.

By combining interviews and digital observations, and studying both practices online and how these are accounted for, I have been able to study how subjects and platforms reproduce each other. By promoting particular kinds of *platform entrepreneurialism*, I have in particular shown how platforms impose non-standard contracts, encourage intensified self-commodification, and reproduce discourses that promote “meritocratic” independent careers as empowering sources of freedom and creativity, all while shifting the risks and costs to individuals. All the analytical chapters emphasize different aspects of this process, while also showing how this in practice is seldom a straightforward process. While platforms often are designed

and engineered with certain functions and governmental aims in mind, they produce contingency that opens up for different forms of conduct from users who might utilize them in ways not planned for by developers and engineers.

Future research would benefit from seeking to better understand processes of digital governmentality and subject formation through an ethnographic engagement, exploring the meetings between platforms and subjects in not only work-related settings but also other, non-work settings. In the case of this study, the digital ethnographic approach has been important for coming close not only to interviewees but also the digital environments where they are active.

### **“At least I have this freedom”: The role of fantasies and imaginaries**

A final contribution is to the literature on hope, futurity, fantasies, and imaginaries in contemporary capitalism (Berlant, 2011; Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013; Duffy, 2017; Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2020) and their role in sustaining precarious digital labor markets. To highlight this, we can circle back to the title of the dissertation.

The statement by the illustrator Erik that “at least I have this freedom” is significant and emblematic for the thesis in several ways. On a literal level, it speaks to the importance of freedom as a theme which kept resurfacing in my interviews. Freedom as a noun haunts many of their reasonings and accounts: ever-elusive, the desire to be free is one of the discursive resources that are used to justify engagement in precarious freelance work. It thus ties into various hopes for the future that may or may not materialize, as well as various fantasies about what a “good life” looks like. That freedom functions as a fantasy was directly reflected on by Erik in the full quote (which I also analyze in chapter 8):

Erik: I think it’s based in some kind of fear that if I don’t see myself as freer than others, then it would not be worth doing this. So, you guard yourself in a way. Like, even if I don’t earn nearly as much as an employee, you’re very quick to think that “at least I have this freedom”.

Rather than being something that one either has or has not, freedom here appears as a fantasy that workers can draw on to make their choices accountable, to develop coherent self-understandings, and to guard against uncomfortable realizations. I have shown how such sustaining fantasies — not only about freedom but also other aspects — drive the self-precarization of digital freelancers, even when they, like Erik, may reflect on and ironize over such fantasies.

Highlighting the importance of fantasies should thus not be read as some obscuring paraphrase of false consciousness arguments. Rather, my argument is that living our lives is always tied up with fantasies and socially shared narratives around possible future scenarios related to what we think we desire. Fantasy is not a mask or an illusion that hides some supposed “true” reality, but it is rather, as Žižek (2008:29p) puts it, “on the side of reality itself” and inseparable from it in the sense

that it guides our actions and gives coherence and structure to our everyday social realities. For Žižek, fantasy is not primarily located in what we *think* but in what we are actually *doing*. We might, for instance, follow a fantasy of self-realization and happiness through work in how we govern our lives and careers, even though we recognize the hazards, difficulties, and improbabilities of actually fulfilling this fantasy. It is in this sense, that fantasy, according to Žižek, is ideological.

There are many different ideological fantasies that appear throughout the chapters: about how the freelancers' work will give their life meaning, about individual sovereignty, what working life today should look like, what one should do to succeed, how algorithms work, why insecurity and work-related anxiety is worth enduring, how struggles in the present may pay off in the future, and so on. The dissertation adds to the understanding of the role of fantasies in orienting workers toward insecure labor markets that demand independent self-enterprise.

With the help of digital observations, the thesis has shown how ideological fantasies about a flexible, creative, and digital working life are spread through platforms that both shape and profit on such discursive imaginaries. Algorithmic gossip impels workers to engage in constant activity; inspirational articles from influencers and freelance organizations promote place-independent work and trends like “digital nomadism” as carefree, passionate lifestyles; and umbrella organizations and labor platforms market freelancing as convenient, modern solutions to the growing fragmentation and insecurity of the labor market. Such fantasies give legitimacy to the current world of work and propel activity within it.

Digitally-mediated fantasies shape the contemporary culture around work by promoting a future-oriented, optimistic, and hopeful outlook on digital self-enterprise. While they can be meaningful, the thesis also shows the dark underside of such fantasies and affective orientations. With Berlant's (2011) notion, I have argued such fantasies can lead to a situation of cruel optimism, or “an affectively stunning double bind: a bind to fantasies that block the satisfactions they offer, and a binding to the promise of optimism as such that the fantasies have come to represent” (Berlant, 2011:50). “Cruel optimism” is not the description of a purely psychological state or a description of subjects' choices and actions as irrational. It is rather, as Berlant (2011:24) puts it, concerned with explaining our endurance in maintaining attachments to objects which — while they are entangled with fantasies and desires that are meaningful and important to us — can also be harmful.

We should however be careful not to trade optimism for defeatism and to mistake hope for passive acceptance. Hopes and fantasies of the future have an ideological function in digital capitalism and can lead to the acceptance of highly risky and exploitative scenarios. However, they are also embedded in the moral everyday practices of people when they go about their everyday lives and can be a positive force for change (Alacovska, 2019). As Mackenzie and McKinley (2020:19) write, hope “is critical, rather than neoliberal, in its desire for a more flourishing future”. Identifying the fantasies that bind us to the present can be a first step for imagining and orienting our optimistic attachments differently.



## Reflections: Futures, exits, and counter-conducts

When analyzing the material, dimensions of resistance have often been somewhat elusive. One reason is that digital freelancers often already see themselves as oppositional to various things: to a rigid working life, a nine-to-five lifestyle, controlling bosses, or work perceived as non-fulfilling. The thesis shows how their precarious conditions are coupled with a sense of loving one's work, of being proud over one's career, and of seeking to escape the routinized rhythms of hierarchical workplaces. Critiquing today's working life should thus not end up in nostalgic pleas to go back to a lost world of secure, full-time employment. That is an imaginary full of just as many ideological fantasies and fallacies as those presenting today's gig economy as a source of radical freedom and liberation. Desires for more free and autonomous work are real; yet, currently, this fact allows the "yearning for worker independence to be hijacked and transformed into an instrument of proletarianization" (Fleming, 2017:703).

With this in mind, how can we avoid resignation in the face of a precarious labor market insinuating itself as a new normality? And how can we instead point to new imaginaries of work, lines of flight (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988), and alternative subjectivities? A difficult but necessary task is to figure out how the positive elements of digital freelance work can be accentuated in the future, while the negative elements — the low wages, chronic overwork, stress, sleeplessness, and the competition which makes every individual personally responsible to the market — can be challenged and substituted for something else.

### **The Swedish model's limits and a politics of de-commodification**

Toward the end of my interviews, I usually asked the participants what they liked the most and least about being a freelancer. Regarding the worst part, the most common answer was the lack of supportive welfare systems protecting them in case of unemployment or illness. In several interviews, this led to discussions about what can be changed to make freelance life easier. A common point brought up was that the Swedish systems for unemployment benefits and social insurance need to be re-oriented to better include non-employed workers such as freelancers, without them having to, for instance, close down their companies to access benefits.

Recent events like the Covid-19 pandemic and the emergence of the gig economy have created more public awareness of the vulnerabilities and limits of the Nordic welfare models (Larsen & Ilsøe, 2022). With the Swedish model privileging the negotiations of the labor market parties, institutional gaps and cracks are reinforced that reproduce inequalities between those within and outside of standard employment. If digital freelancing and solo self-employment, as I have argued, are indeed an expression of how Swedish labor markets may develop in the future, then the Swedish model must change so that it can better accommodate and protect non-

standard workers. That all workers who pay taxes and contribute value to society should be able to access safety nets and social insurance, whether they do so as employees or solo self-employed, is central to the continued legitimacy of the Swedish model. This is also important so that employers cannot use freelancers and atypical workers to avoid collective agreements and regulations, which in a longer perspective might also threaten the job market for employed workers.

In contemporary debates around the gig economy, unions and other actors who have fought for the increased protection of platform workers have largely focused on the question of legal classification and misclassification. The new EU directive (European Parliament, 2024), which obliges member countries to introduce a legal presumption of an employment relationship on labor platforms if they cannot prove otherwise, is a potentially important step toward improving the situation of gig workers. However, it does not change the situation for solo self-employed workers, like digital freelancers, who are not legally misclassified but who still fall outside of systems for income protection designed around standard employment. For them, recent guidelines from the European Commission (2022) that open up for the collective bargaining of certain groups of solo self-employed are more hopeful. Yet, especially in relation the negotiation of fees, there are several difficulties regarding how to enforce fair wages for workers who negotiate their prices individually based on their personal reputation and competences, and where clients can disregard price recommendations by unions (cf. Salamon, 2019; Norbäck, 2022).

Decades of neoliberal deregulation have presented so-called free markets as inherently positive and as a solution to a range of social problems. Swedish labor markets have since the 1990s been characterized by responsabilizing workfare policies, increased conditionality for receiving unemployment benefits, and changes to the Employment Protection Act (LAS) that have shifted the balance between employers and employees.<sup>16</sup> Challenging worker responsabilization and precarization must entail questioning that it somehow benefits society to make each and every individual personally responsible for their economic destiny. To create actual independence for digital freelancers, more inclusive systems should be put in place that better guard against sickness, unemployment, and income loss, as well as creating better conditions for parental leave and competence development.

An antidote could be to once again reorient politics toward what Esping-Andersen (1990) years ago described as a central element of universalistic welfare states like Sweden — the *decommodification* of labor. Defined as “when a service is rendered as a matter of right, and when a person can maintain a livelihood without reliance on the market” (1990:22), Esping-Andersen points out how decommodification

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<sup>16</sup> The Employment Protection Act (*Lagen om anställningsskydd*, or LAS), introduced in 1974, regulates the conditions for employment, dismissal, and termination of employment in Sweden. When it was first introduced, temporary employment contracts were only allowed under limited circumstances and for a limited time, while permanent employment contracts were the norm. LAS has since then gradually been loosened up to make it easier for employers to hire workers on temporary employment contracts without any specific reason (Berglund et al., 2017).

throughout the 20th century has been an integral part in socialist politics for combating worker alienation and lack of control, within and outside of work.

A contemporary politics of decommodification should, I think, be based on an understanding of a broader value of social reproduction. For workers like digital freelancers, it is necessary to insist that the value they produce exceeds the time they spend doing paid commissions. As it becomes more difficult to separate work from non-work, more universal welfare provisions should, as Virno (2003) suggests, not be oriented toward old distinctions between labor and non-labor, but rather “between remunerated life and non-remunerated life”. He reminds us that “the border between these two [...] is arbitrary, changeable, [and] subject to political decision making” (Virno, 2003:104).

It is a topic for future discussion whether a contemporary politics of de-commodification should take the form of more inclusive and universal worker benefits and social security systems that do not privilege workers with standard employment or, preferably, in my opinion, a universal living wage and basic income scheme (cf. Weeks, 2011; Fumagalli et al., 2024). The introduction of more universal measures and a strong politics of de-commodification could nonetheless counteract both the economic, affective, and existential vulnerability that are the results of market dependence. It could also answer to other future challenges to work, such as the rapid development of more sophisticated systems of artificial intelligence (AI).

Since I conducted my interviews, various generative AI services have been launched — systems which develop precisely by accumulating and “learning” from copyrighted cultural content and knowledge commons produced by cultural workers and other users — that allow anyone to create both visual, text-based, and sound-based products with a few written inputs.<sup>17</sup> It is up to future research to explore how generative AI will affect cultural production and working life. The history of technological development teaches us that we should be wary of claims that automation will necessarily put us out of work; human labor and sociality are after all the very basis of AI (Pasquinelli, 2023), and such technologies are embedded in social and cultural practices (Raviola, 2020). Nonetheless, if the use of AI technologies remains unregulated, it is not unreasonable to expect that they will make already competitive cultural labor markets even more competitive by further devaluing cultural labor and outsourcing creative tasks from workers to machines, thus making it more difficult to demand fair pay (Lee, 2024). A decommodifying, universal welfare politics, such as a basic income scheme, could reduce the threat of these technologies to the subsistence of cultural workers and others.

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<sup>17</sup> The absence of AI throughout these pages reflects that when I conducted my interviews, it was not the main issue that it has become since.

## Collectivizing the experience of work

A more sustainable working life for digital freelancers should also involve creating conditions for imagining and building new forms of solidaristic subjectivities, grounded in the collective experiences of work. We have seen how self-precarization and platform subjectivation currently directs competition not only outward but also inward, and turns individual market performance into the measure of both success and failure (Scharff, 2016). While the participants identify strongly with their work, this is often quite an individualistic identification, which gives self-coherence without necessarily translating into a strong collective identity. Most interviewees accounted for experiences of isolation, loneliness, and lacking a clear social context for their work, which are tendencies amplified by platformization. Few saw the purpose of collective organizing, such as being members of a union.

Part of the potential for digital freelancers to resist the power of platform capital can nonetheless be traced to the commons, which are inherent to immaterial and biopolitical forms of labor, and which cannot fully be subsumed by employers and platform owners. Their know-how, skills, networks, and equipment are not tied to any client or workplace, which means that it can be used for autonomous collaboration and self-organization, and put to use in ways that further the interests of freelance communities and civil society. Rather than only being threats to working conditions and pay, we should recognize the critical potential of alternative platforms for organizing workers and distributing knowledge commons. The ideals of a more open and collaborative “sharing economy” are still worth fighting for, even though they may seem ever-more utopian in the light of digital capital’s enclosure and co-opting of digital commons.

Alternative models of organizing work in the platform economy, such as platform cooperatives, can for instance contain the potential for a more just and inclusive digital economy, which should be the topic of more future research as well as community experimentation (see Scholz, 2017; Grohmann, 2023; Cano et al., 2024). Such platforms could be organized by workers themselves, but also potentially by unions. As is increasingly recognized (e.g., Bucht, 2022), unions need to develop new strategies for organizing workers in the platform age and to make themselves relevant for independent platform workers.

Informal and alternatives modes of unionism can likewise prove helpful for building new alliances and solidarities in the platform age, by organizing atomized workers that traditionally have been thought difficult or impossible to organize (cf. Però, 2020; Chicchi & Marrone, 2024). Però (2020) sees in such initiatives the possibility for building “communities of struggle”, which are not rooted in traditional unions or particular workplaces, but which build on the affective bonds and solidarity between workers. Such communities, he argues, can be

geared towards mutual support but also, crucially, towards campaigning, mobilization and informal bargaining. This contributes to workers’ empowerment, social integration and the effective representation of their material and non-material

needs, in ways that alleviate both the ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ dimensions of workers’ precarity (Alberti et al., 2018). (Però, 2020:901)

The tendencies in my material of freelancers going together in online communities, of re-framing each other as colleagues rather than competitors, of building freelance solidarity, and of sharing tactics for micro-resistance and counter-conduct against the enclosing tendencies of platform apparatuses, carries some potential for building communities of both care and struggle — communities that, as Alacovska (2020:739) puts it, encourage workers to act not “self-wise” but “other-wise”, and to engage in practices of compassion, relation-building, and hope, which are not primarily oriented toward the market and the self, but towards others.

### **Redirecting desire, revaluing culture, and reimagining the good life**

Decommodifying workers to reduce their dependence on the market, as well as building more group-oriented and solidaristic subjectivities and more caring and collaborative communities, can finally also provide a foundation from which to, in broader terms, challenge the capitalization of life. Given that biopower centralizes the struggles between capital and life, it becomes, as Fleming (2014a:122) points out, all the more essential to avoid reinforcing the norms of productivism and instead see the political potential of *non-work*. What this ultimately means is that we should not only engage in (very important) discussions of how we can imagine “good work” in the future cultural industries, as authors like Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) have done, but also how we can reimagine a good life outside of work.

The contemporary work ethic celebrates being passionate for one’s work as a moral value (Farrugia, 2022). This work ethic, underpinned by meritocratic fantasies of digital freelancing as an easily accessible and self-fulfilling career choice for everyone, serves particular economic functions today. They benefit clients who get a large pool of self-employed labor to choose from, as well as all the companies and platforms that in various ways profit on such activity, whether or not it translates into economically sustainable careers for freelancers themselves.

Yet, there are, perhaps, signs that the winds are changing. Climate change continues to put into question the value of infinite growth and economic productivity fueling unsustainable consumerist lifestyles (Soper, 2020; Rennstam & Paulsson, 2024). After the Covid-19 pandemic, fears of a “great resignation” in the United States — when many employees voluntarily resigned due to stagnant wages and discontent — and global trends like “quiet quitting” (Baranes & Brown, 2023; Weinstein & Hirsch, 2023; Atalay & Dağistan, 2023; Lee et al., 2024), have also put into question the moral value of suffering work-related stress, burnout, and poverty.

In Sweden, the question of working time has largely been depoliticized since the last statutory work time reduction in 1973, when the 40-hour work week was introduced. Yet, now it has once again become part of the political programs of not only the Left and the Green parties but also the Social Democrats who seek to make

a general work-time reduction into a question for the national election in 2026. The Swedish union DIK, which organizes workers in the cultural and creative industries, recently carried out a report on attitudes to work-time reduction on a sample of 2030 Swedes of working age (Alm Dahlin, 2024). It shows that 64% in general, 68% of those aged 20–29, and 76% of women want to see a 30-hour workweek. The most commonly stated reasons for wanting a work-time reduction are better quality of life, better balance between work and private life, and to reduce stress for better mental health. One out of five is more positive to a general work time reduction today than they were just two years ago, which the report attributes to changed ideological attitudes toward work, especially by young people. Does this indicate a rupture in the ethic of being passionate for your precarity?

While solo self-employed would not be directly affected by a general work-time reduction, the desire to work less rather than more is visible also in my data. Several participants expressed that they wish to downshift in order to free up time for friends, family, or non-economic creative activities and transactions. Some wished to, or had already, quit freelancing altogether. As an individual tactic, work-reduction or making an exit from freelancing (or even paid labor as such) has limited utility. It is a costly alternative that is not open for everyone, and that furthermore does not challenge the structures that make labor precarious. Nonetheless, it can open up for alternative imaginaries that refuse the cruel attachments (Berlant, 2011) to insecure and costly precarious work.

For cultural workers in particular, there is potential in re-orienting creative and artistic practice away from market-oriented entrepreneurship, in the ways promoted by neoliberal creative industries' policies, toward alternative modes of living and social change (Sandoval, 2018; Alacovska, 2020; Mackenzie & McKinley, 2020). In times of de-funding of arts and culture, a challenge for progressive politics is to re-imagine art and culture as public and common goods in need of strong state support, which are valuable regardless of whether they are motors for economic productivity or not. One of my interviewees, the filmmaker Patrik, reflected on this at length:

[As a cultural worker,] you produce something that is valuable for society. But you cannot measure that value as you measure any commodity. It has an immaterial value, and we just have to accept that some things have immaterial values. That's where we must end up... we must be able to value things that cannot be measured. But we have gone very far in the other direction, I think. Only that which can be measured has any value. But like, quality of life is ... you *can* translate it into numbers in different ways, but you can't, like, objectively value it by placing a number on it. So, I don't know, I hope we get a discussion about the value of culture ... because yeah, for me, culture is an expression of democracy. Those that "can afford" a free culture are usually democracies where we, together, take responsibility for society.

Digital freelancers in the cultural industries can perhaps themselves play an important role in reorienting desire away from work, and to "subvert the

normalisation of precarity rather than symbolise it” (Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2020:19). As I have argued, they are in themselves part of the discursive knowledge production by which subjectivity is formed today. By creating desire and public opinion, particularly through digital platforms and social media, they contribute to the formation and integration of consumer-subjects. While it may seem naïve in social contexts so thoroughly shaped by commercial logics, the power they have to shape social imaginaries and subjectivities can, theoretically, be used to orient desire and affect differently, in order to produce new imaginaries of the good life.

The desire for something different is immanent to the self-precarization processes. In orienting their lives and subjectivities toward creative, self-expressive, and independent work, digital freelancers seek to make their lives meaningful. The very contingency and ambivalence of self-precarization, however, means that these desires can be oriented differently: away from precarious self-enterprise, and toward alternative practices and post-work imaginaries where work is not the center of meaning. Such a redirection of desire and aspiration could form the basis for reimagining the “good life” beyond, rather than through, work.

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# Appendix 1. Participants

<b>Pseudonym (gender: age group)</b>	<b>Primary creative occupation(s)</b>	<b>Form of employment</b>	<b>Main working space</b>
Adam (M:30+)	Graphic design, illustration, web design	Limited company	Home
Agnes (W:30+)	Illustration, graphic design	Umbrella company	Home
Alice (W:35+)	Photographer, content creator, copy writer	Sole trader	Home
Elinor (W:25+)	Content creator, illustrator	Sole trader	Home, co-working
Erik (M:40+)	Illustration, graphic design, photography	Limited company	Rented office space (shared)
Eva (W:35+)	Content creation, communicator, web shop	Limited company	Rented office space (solo)
Hanna (W:30+)	Photographer, social media manager, blogger	Limited company	Home
José (M:45+)	Graphic design, branding	Sole trader	Home, cafés
John (M:40+)	Graphic design, web design, branding	Sole trader	Home
Linus (M:55+)	Illustration, graphic design, web design	Sole trader	Home, cafés
Lizabeth (W:55+)	Illustration, graphic design	Sole trader	Home
Magnus (M:40+)	Graphic design, web design, marketing	Sole trader	Home
Marcus (M:20+)	Filmmaker, photographer	Sole trader	Home, cafés
Marie (W:25+)	Copywriter, content creator, photographer	Sole trader	Home
Matilda (W:30+)	Communicator, copywriter, photographer	Sole trader	Home, rented office (solo)
Matt (M:30+)	Content creator, photographer, blogger	Sole trader	Home

Nils (M:30+)	Design, branding, content creation	Sole trader	Home
Olof (M:45+)	Illustration, design	Sole trader	Home
Patrik (M:45+)	Filmmaker, communicator	Sole trader	Rented office space (shared)
Sara (W:30+)	Content creation, journalism, lecturer, writer	Limited company	Rented office space (solo)
Susanne (W:35+)	Photographer	Limited company	Home, client's office
Therese (W:55+)	Graphic design, web design	Limited company/ umbrella company	Home
Ylva (W:30+)	Content creator, author, translator	Limited partnership	Rented office (solo)

# Appendix 2. Example of interview guide

Semi-structured interview guide (which has been adapted to different interviewees, and followed more or less in different cases). Some themes have not been relevant for certain interviewees. Interview guide in Swedish.

## **Bakgrundsfrågor**

- Kan du berätta lite om dig själv?
- Utbildning? Tidigare arbete? Familj?

## **Arbete och motivation**

- Hur skulle du beskriva ditt arbete för någon som inte vet vad du jobbar med?
- Kan du berätta hur du började frilansa/starta eget?
- Kan du beskriva hur en typisk arbetsdag ser ut för dig?
- Har du någon särskild drivkraft till att arbeta med detta?

## **Plats**

- Var brukar du arbeta? Hemma, kontor, annan plats? Kan du beskriva/visa din arbetsplats för mig?
- Fördelar, nackdelar med detta? Kollegor, ensamhet?
- Hur upplever du det att arbeta från hemmet?

## **Uppdrag och betalning**

- Hur brukar du hitta uppdrag?
- Vad för typ av uppdrag brukar du ta på dig?
- Vad utgör ett bra uppdrag enligt dig?
- Har du upplevt svårigheter att ta betalt för uppdrag? Hur tänker du kring prissättning?
- Har du utfört uppdrag utan ersättning? Vad tänker du kring detta?



## **Plattformer**

- Vilka digitala plattformer/ sociala medier använder du i ditt arbete?
- Varför dessa? Hur väljer du plattform?
- Använder du sociala medier och plattformer för nätverkande? Vilka sociala medier?
- Hur använder du plattform XX?
- Hur viktiga är dessa plattformer för hur du försörjer dig och hittar jobb?
- Anpassar du innehåll utifrån plattform? Hur?
- Finns det andra plattformer du funderat på att använda?
- Hur mycket tid av ditt arbete lägger du uppskattningsvis på kommunikation via sociala medier?

## **Självpresentation och personlig marknadsföring**

- Kan du berätta/visa hur du använder sociala medier/plattformer för att presentera dig själv och/eller ditt företag?
- Gör du någon åtskillnad mellan privata/professionella sociala medier?
- Skulle du säga att du använder sociala medier för att marknadsföra dig själv? Hur, på vilket sätt, varför inte?
- Hur känner du inför att marknadsföra dig själv?
- Vad tänker du inför termen personligt varumärke? Anser du att du har ett sånt varumärke?

## **Kommunikation**

- Har du en viss målgrupp som du försöker anpassa digitalt innehåll till?
- Hur arbetar du för att göra ditt innehåll synligt för exempelvis kunder eller följare?
- Hur arbetar du med att skapa engagemang bland dina följare?
- Har rankningar, statistik över hur många som konsumerar ditt innehåll, antal följare etc. någon inverkan på hur du arbetar?
- Har algoritmer någon inverkan på de plattformer du använder? Anpassar du ditt användande eller innehåll till algoritmer? Hur?

## **Inkomst, reklam, sponsring etc.**

- Använder du digitala plattformer för att tjäna pengar på andra sätt än att hitta uppdrag? Hur?
- Hur ser du på sponsrade reklamsamarbeten genom sociala medier?

- Har du själv deltagit i sådana samarbeten?
- [om ja]: Hur väljer du vilka företag du vill samarbeta med? och vilka produkter du vill göra reklam för? Vilka företag skulle du inte samarbeta med?
- Hur arbetar du när du gör reklam?

### **Arbetsförhållanden och otrygghet**

- Upplever du osäkerhet över att ha en inkomst/hitta tillräckligt med jobb?
- Hur upplever du att du skyddas av sociala trygghetssystem vid exempelvis sjukdom, arbetslöshet, osv?
- Är du medlem i något fackförbund? Varför/varför inte?

### **Arbete/fritid**

- Brukar du kunna koppla av från jobbet när du är hemma?
- Känner du dig någonsin stressad av att hela tiden vara uppkopplad?
- Känner du dig någonsin stressad över att du måste uppdatera dina sociala medier / kommunicera med följare?
- Hur gör du för att separera fritid från arbete?

### **Avslutning**

- Hur trivs du överlag med ditt arbete? Vad är det sämsta? Vad är det bästa?
- Är det något du vill lägga till som du tycker vi har missat?



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