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Creative Labor in the Gig Economy: Wellbeing, Identity, and Collective Organizing

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the transformation of creative labor within the gig economy, focusing on the interconnected dimensions of wellbeing, identity formation, and collective organizing. The expansion of digital platforms has fundamentally reshaped creative work by introducing task modularization, algorithmic management, reputational systems, and data-driven surveillance. While gig work offers flexibility, autonomy, and expanded market access for creative professionals such as writers, designers, musicians, filmmakers, and digital artists, it simultaneously intensifies precarious working conditions characterized by income instability, long working hours, weak social protection, and blurred work-life boundaries. The study explores how these conditions affect the mental health and professional identities of creative workers, particularly in atypical and fragmented employment arrangements. It further investigates how workers negotiate self-expression, authenticity, and professional legitimacy within platform-mediated environments that reward visibility, ratings, and constant productivity. The research also analyses emerging forms of solidarity and collective action among creative gig workers, including digital activism, worker cooperatives, grassroots organizations, online communities, and platform-based alliances. Through comparative examples from Africa, Europe, and Asia, the study highlights both the challenges and innovative responses shaping contemporary creative labor. The findings demonstrate that despite the fragmentation and surveillance embedded in platform economies, creative workers continue to develop new forms of resistance, cooperation, and mutual support. The study concludes that sustainable creative labor in the gig economy requires stronger labour protections, transparent platform governance, enhanced social protections, and inclusive cultural policies capable of safeguarding workers' wellbeing, autonomy, and collective rights in rapidly evolving digital environments.

Keywords: Creative Labor, Gig Economy, Platformization, Collective Organizing and Worker Wellbeing

INTRODUCTION

Creative workers are increasingly turning to online platforms to access gigs that supplement or replace their traditional income sources. This transition has broad implications for their wellbeing, identity, and interest in collective organizing [1]. Gig platforms are transforming creative labor by modularizing tasks, implementing rating systems, and exercising algorithmic management [1]. Workers continue to find gig work fulfilling, but the survey results suffer from methodological limitations, and the impact on short-term fluctuations remains uncertain. The aim of this study is to examine how online platforms are reshaping creative workers' conceptualizations of autonomy, precarity, and solidarity. Wellbeing, identity, and organizing are investigated as significant lenses through which to analyse contemporary working conditions [2]. The gig economy denotes a wide ensemble of labour arrangements and organizational practices [1]. To advance this study, the focus is directed toward the rapid emergence of online platforms that intermediate paid work. Consideration is given to the interrelations amongst

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creative labour, gig economy, autonomy, precarity, platformization, and solidaristic organizing in the context of historical transformations in ways of working [2].

Conceptual Foundations: Creative Labor in the Gig Economy

The term creative labor identifies work that engenders symbolic rather than material change and encompasses artistic, design, and culture-related activities [3]. Occupations typically classed as creative include visual artists, musicians, writers, designers, photographers, architects, and performers. Online platforms, widely recognized as constitutive of the gig economy, facilitate the provision, transacting, and marketing of creative work; home-based production, scheduling flexibility, and task-based organization, identified as characteristic micro-level features of commodified creative labor, are key components of this economy [2]. The gig economy is intrinsically linked to platformization, an ongoing process by which transactions, interactions, and relationships are conducted via digital platforms that connect suppliers and buyers [3]. Gig platforms engage creative labor through task modularization and ratings-based feedback loops. Manual laborers, machine operators, and service workers also engage in creative gig activities [2]. Creative work is a candidate for gig labour next to service work, delivery, logistics, transportation, and other spheres. Service professions constitute the first wave of platformization of work. Gig platforms solicit creative labor. Workers provide text, audio, image, and video services in writing, translation, editing, and transcription, voice-over, casting, designing, and modelling [1]. Precarity and autonomy emerge amidst a broader crisis of work that destabilises time, space, and location. Here creative workers confront algorithmic management akin to that faced by other segment of gig workforce [4].

Wellbeing of Creative Workers: Mental Health, Financial Insecurity, and Work-Life Boundaries

The gig economy has experienced remarkable growth over the past two decades, driven by the rapid adoption of digital technologies and platforms [5]. According to recent estimates, around 30 to 40 percent of the workforce in industrialized countries is engaged in secondary gig activities, while the share of gig workers in low- and middle-income countries may be as high as 70 percent [5]. Participating in the gig economy can offer freelancers greater autonomy and flexibility in their working lives, allowing them to pursue creative endeavors outside traditional employment. As workers increasingly seek to forge professional identities and determine how they earn a living, often outside the boundaries of formal employment, wellbeing emerges as a crucial area of concern [5]. Reviewing the empirical evidence, creative gig workers face significant mental health challenges stemming from ongoing financial precarity, a high volume of workloads, a lack of scheduling control, and difficulties establishing work-life boundaries [6]. These challenges are aggravated by personal records, past-trauma experiences, and the inability to disconnect from work. Nevertheless, some creative gig workers exhibit considerable resilience, with factors such as systems-based thinking and a strong work ethic playing a protective role [1].

Identity Formation in Atypical Work Arrangements

In the gig economy, the majority of service workers inhabit cultural industries marked by atypical work arrangement[4]. For many, creative work provides a crucial source of income and a means of identifying themselves and developing identities, an understanding of their "self" as individuals engaged in culturally meaningful activities[5]. The tendency toward self-exploitation, long hours, and reliance on social media to secure gigs can make it difficult for these gig workers to develop a professional identity. Contractual arrangements that fragment the production process disrupt the possibility of developing coherent narratives around one's work [4]. On the one hand, workers worry that piecing together gigs marketed to diverse audiences in different geographical locations inhibits identity formation, one public-facing identity does not feel like an authentic, true self. On the other hand, the segregation of creative and non-creative gigs complicates identity formation when working outside one's creative field but is necessary to subsist [5]. For those intending to exit, developing a coherent narrative around the broader portfolio becomes crucial in order to signal identity-transitioning and to increase the likelihood that gigs presented in one's portfolio align with new aspirations[4]. Throughout history, workers have encountered various constraints on their ability to name or narrate the fullness of their undertaking, as well as the compositions of mobilising materials or other variables, all of which would ordinarily reside within the broad freedom of organizing work. Early in their careers, many construction workers, for instance, identify themselves with general contracting even if they have not yet secured jobs within that field; they may self-describe as aspiring specialists, or "interning," when working in a field closely aligned with their core competencies[5]. Sometimes, however, the tags become an integral component toward a distinct line of what fits under the umbrella of "opportunity." Social technologies that aggregate tagging across networks, in combination with crowdsourcing's open-operational state, enable clients to gravitate toward the fragments specified by the most intriguing tags [4, 5]. The visibility and openness demanded by credibility leveraging and reputation labour may also pose challenges to the exercise of personal expression through work [4, 5]. The accountability imposed by the "open" paradigm of crowd participation in general presents foundational distinctions from the earlier paradigm of "closed" participation in a snapshotted works the creation of the latter being premised on the Hermeneutics of the Copy, as elaborated by Walter Benjamin and less discussed

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today[4]. Those compelled to communicate on-the-ground perspectives in open public form may face a difficult choice: either to furnish pure representation of the work itself, potentially disabusing expression's attribution to something more imaginative; or to pursue quasi-inventive re-creation of the material presented, following imaginal fabrications leading away from the original process [5].

Collective Organizing and Labor Solidarity: History, Models, and Contemporary Practice

Collective organizing and labor solidarity have evolved historically through various models of worker mobilization, ranging from unions and worker centers to cooperatives and platform-driven alliances. Digital platforms have transformed collective efforts, enabling creative gig workers to form communities that advocate for rights, support individual resilience, and provide educational resources [1]. Owing to algorithmic management and subcontracting, platform-based organizing faces constraints on leverage and legal recognition. Nonetheless, online communities and social media play a significant role in shaping collective action, allowing gig agendas to emerge independently of worker classification [2]. Recent campaigns by video game workers exemplify the exploration of digital mobilization models and underscore the significance of a "moment of indignation" in generating activism for creative justice. Kelly's mobilization theory offers continued relevance for both unionized and atypical sectors, providing a toolkit based on five prerequisites that guide worker action [4]. Resistance in cultural industries occurs within cooperative co-working spaces, alongside grassroots groups, virtual campaigns, collaborations with unions, and "alt labor" organizations, intensifying over the past decade. While some critics assert that digital networks foster slacktivism, others contend that online platforms facilitate the global mobilization of resistance against exploitation [2].

Institutional and Policy Context: Regulation, Social Protection, and Cultural Policy

Creative labor has been characterized as predominantly "independent" or "non-standard" work [3], encompassing project-based activities, self-employment, freelancing, short-term, or other forms of flexible engagement. A good portion of this labor transpires through digital platforms for booking and payment [4]. These platforms not only reorganize creative work through task modularization, rating systems, and algorithmic monitoring and enforcement, but they also shape the interplay between health and precarity, career trajectories and identity, and the mobilization of collective organizing[5]. Numerous governments and institutions across jurisdictions have formulated regulations directing how platforms operate and what access to social protection, if any, creative gig workers honestly receive from these digital platforms, essential yet often neglected elements of decent work and quality creative production [5]. Regulations govern classification and labour rights as well as decent standards, with a focus on income and security, access to basic services, working time, and forms of supply. Data-driven surveillance, monitoring, transparency, and informality characterize platform work [4]. Regulations, can hence, only be effective with comprehensive data on the nature of platform work and its socio-economic situation [5].

Digital Platforms, Data, and Surveillance: Implications for Autonomy

Digital platforms increasingly mediate creative activity and constitute an inseparable facet of contemporary work. Governance structures, data practices, and surveillance technologies are important constituents of platform systems that shape work and influence degree of autonomy across diverse arrangements [1]. Gig platforms reconfigure creative labor through modularization of tasks, rating systems, and algorithmic management 5. Participatory mechanisms such as feedback and ratings legitimize top-down control while concealing it behind the screen, reducing opportunities for community formation [2]. Autonomy encompasses control over one's actions and decisions as well as knowledge about those decisions; platform systems often suppress both by monopolizing the data and obscuring algorithmic decision points. Significant decisions concerning labor opportunities take place without worker consent, limiting economic agency [3] yet the notion of consent is invoked to obscures the contours of actual decision-making and level of control involved [4]. Control over the data constituting one's own labor is also critical, yet the logics of the platform determine to whom such data is available to be sold, reused, or repurposed, thereby affecting ongoing worker agency or freedom[5]. Meaning also retains importance; how platforms curate or influence social connections, in combination with additional data, enable broader surveillance, while avoidance of surveillance may subsequently lead to devaluation again the platform [6].

Methodological Approaches to Studying Creative Gig Labor

Research on creative labor in the gig economy has relied on diverse methods: surveys, interviews, case studies, and ethnographies of digital networks [6]. Studies have featured different kinds of source material, including platform-provisioned data about users' activities. Creative work has been a particular focus, examining mental health, identity formation, algorithmic management, and organizing [7]. Broadening participation can enhance future research on this timely topic. Emerging approaches include online community mapping, deliberative engagement with cultural policy-formation, co-design of creative entrepreneurial support mechanisms, cross-national exchange between a European community and North American networks, tracking user journeys to unravel complex pathways into platform work, and origins of active membership in worker-centered digital spaces.[6] Participatory action research prioritizes co-enquiry about creative gig work within communities and networks over individuals. Artistic inquiry

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supports participatory platforms for contemplation and collaboration [5]. Experimentation with new models could further enrich knowledge of this rapidly evolving landscape [1].

Exemplars of Cohesion, Resistance, and Innovation

Creative workers across diverse sectors engage in gig work through an array of digital platforms. Their pursuit of autonomy and flexibility drives interest in community-based solutions that offer mutual relief, enable peer support, facilitate knowledge-sharing, and provide opportunities for collective engagement [5]. However, creative gig workers are frequently disengaged; many existing solidarity initiatives are persistent yet limited. The selected case studies illustrate that community and organizational forms are propelling creative gig workers toward greater cohesion, activism, and innovation [6]. Creative gig workers in Thailand resist and negotiate platform-imposed identity narratives while pursuing personal and collective goals. Delivery riders contest platform-generated identity narratives emphasizing flexibility and self-determination as fundamental traits of "good" work. These contested narratives foster collectivism, aiding the emergence of alternative civil-society organizations focused on labor issues [7]. Community-based movements and civil-society organizations such as a cooperative for delivery riders, network for creative workers, and platform for independent film promote professional development, mutual support, and peer-help projects [7].

Conflict and the Emergence of Collective Action among Creative Gig Workers in Africa

Many creative gig workers in Africa conduct multiple remote platform-mediated jobs, pursuing additional income while seeking autonomy, flexibility, or side-hustle engagement [6]. Operating across diverse platforms, they must frequently manage simultaneous tasks due to tight deadlines. These obstacles intensify the struggle between cohesion and platform antagonism. African creatives report rising tensions with clients and platforms, leading to demands for better working conditions, rule revision, and payments reform [7]. They have sought support from existing organizations, including formal unions, informal labor groups, and internationally funded collectives. Some initiative founders embrace non-standard careers, sidestepping mainstream professional norms that hinder participation [5].

Worker Cooperatives and Peer-to-Peer Platforms in the European Creative Economy

Self-employed workers in the European creative economy are increasingly pursuing task-based gigs through broad-spectrum platforms and specialized marketplaces [6]. To address challenges, a growing number of self-employed creative professionals have launched cooperatives or worker-initiatives that adapt peer-to-peer models to cooperative principles in interaction with large commercial platforms. Collaborative co-working spaces also promote solidarity economies for creative workers [7].

Local Organizing, Solidarity Economies, and Community Coping Strategies in Urban Creative Work

Urban professionals across diverse sectors, including culture, nightlife, technology, and the gig economy, have developed community-based coping strategies in response to the pandemic and its aftermath[4]. A substantial minority of these community-based organizations, providing mutual aid, upskilling, space-sharing, and opportunities for collective experimentation, is emerging as community-oriented solidarity economies. Many actors in these communities are self-employed, contract, or short-term workers [5].

Implications for Work Design, Management, and Governance

In a context where digital platforms are increasingly structuring creative work, the accompanying reconfiguration of creative labor, including task modularization, reputational systems, and algorithmic management, has significant implications for workers' wellbeing, identity formation, and collective organizing [2]. Platforms foster and exploit a potentially damaging commodification of creativity, whereby professional identities and aesthetic commitments become subordinate in the competitive pursuit of ratings, high-speed turnover, and financial urgency [3]. Such processes raise open questions about their implications for a field that has often associated autonomy with wellbeing, social engagement, and identity. Theoretical and empirical literatures around these issues lack integration and remain under-researched with respect to creative labor [4]. Designing formal work arrangements to comply with strict labor rights regulations is a pressing challenge for many creative platforms [1]. As workplace stress and dissatisfaction are projected to escalate due to economic uncertainty, institutional fragmentation, and declining public-sector employment, and as gig economy firms continue to exploit normative concerns over these challenges, reassessing the value systems embedded in platform governance, operational practices, business models, and technological affordances is crucial for anticipating future labour justice movements[5]. These trajectories of change reflect evolving social and regulatory influences, but they may also, conversely, precipitate diversification and commercialisation processes that undermine solidarity, coherence, and agency [5].

Future Trajectories: Technological Change, Labor Rights, and Creative Practice

The prospect of creative labor evolving within an increasingly algorithmically governed landscape raises essential questions about future trajectories of both work and organizing in the gig economy[5]. While previous cycles of

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technological change fostered procedural automation that displaced jobs from labor-intensive paths, subsequent societal efforts successfully reclaimed rights and protections that were lost, at least for a time [6]. Hence, gathering existing lessons around creative practice and collective action potentially assures that, amid shifting meanings of what one makes and gains from work, rights and protections nevertheless can remain [7]. When accessing inspirational materials through stasis and before creating emergent markings within fast-forming generative AI artefacts, automated access layers requiring few personal credentials merely eliminate earlier investments of personal time and energy [6]. Repeatedly encountering distribution systems offering % or $ rewards on full or edited versions instead tantalizes with possibilities of even more speedily multiplying multiple frozen reflections offered as feeds without reexertion of care. Contemplating how such changes resonate through multiple creative sectors atop varying existing distribution regimes manifests both markets distinctly helping others and containing horrible features unknown within traditional circulations [7].

CONCLUSION

The gig economy has profoundly transformed the nature of creative labor, redefining how creative workers earn livelihoods, construct professional identities, and engage in collective action. Digital platforms have expanded opportunities for participation in global markets and enabled greater flexibility in working arrangements. However, these opportunities coexist with heightened precarity, algorithmic control, unstable incomes, weak labour protections, and increasing pressures on workers' mental health and personal wellbeing. The commodification of creativity through ratings systems, reputational labour, and constant visibility has complicated the relationship between autonomy and exploitation, often blurring the distinction between professional fulfillment and self-exploitation. Creative workers in platform economies also face significant challenges in maintaining coherent professional identities amid fragmented and short-term gig arrangements. The demand for continuous self-promotion, adaptability, and responsiveness to platform algorithms reshapes how workers perceive themselves and their creative value. Despite these constraints, creative workers continue to exercise agency by negotiating platform-imposed narratives, building alternative professional communities, and experimenting with new forms of identity and collaboration. Collective organizing has emerged as a critical response to the inequalities embedded within platformized creative work. Across different regions, workers have established cooperatives, online solidarity networks, mutual-aid groups, grassroots campaigns, and hybrid forms of labour organizing that challenge exploitative conditions and advocate for fairer treatment. These initiatives demonstrate that solidarity remains possible even within highly individualized and digitally mediated labour systems. At the same time, the effectiveness of collective action is frequently constrained by legal ambiguities, subcontracting practices, data asymmetries, and the dispersed nature of gig work. The study further demonstrates that governance, regulation, and cultural policy will play a decisive role in shaping the future of creative labor. Ensuring fair working conditions in the gig economy requires transparent algorithmic systems, access to social protection, stronger labour rights, data accountability, and institutional recognition of creative gig workers as legitimate economic actors. Policymakers, labour organizations, digital platforms, and cultural institutions must therefore collaborate to establish frameworks that balance technological innovation with worker dignity, autonomy, and social justice. Ultimately, the future of creative labor depends not only on technological advancement but also on the collective ability of societies to protect artistic and creative workers from deepening precarity while preserving the freedom, meaning, and collaborative potential that define creative work itself.

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