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The Management and Exploitation of Creative Labour by Digital Platforms: Redefining Emerging Labour Relations

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Abstract: The rise of the platform economy has transformed creative labour, embedding it within algorithmic systems and infrastructural governance. While platforms promote flexibility and autonomy, they simultaneously impose hidden forms of control through metrics, policies, and opaque design. This study critically examines how platforms manage creative work without formal employment structures, using a qualitative methodology based on discourse analysis of platform policies, public narratives, and secondary literature. Focusing on creators such as writers, designers, and video producers, the research reveals three core findings: platforms exercise managerial control without direct supervision; exploitative dynamics emerge without wage-based labour; and creative autonomy is redefined as self-discipline under platform logic. These findings challenge traditional labour theories and call for new frameworks that account for informal, yet systematic, regulation in digital economies. By exposing the asymmetries in value distribution and control, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of labour exploitation under digital capitalism.

Keywords: platform economy; creative labour; algorithmic control; digital exploitation; infrastructural governance

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the rapid expansion of the platform economy has significantly transformed the ways in which creative workers operate, organize and experience their labour. From graphic designers and freelance writers to video content creators and independent musicians, an increasing number of creative professionals rely on digital platforms for production, distribution and visibility [1]. While platforms appear to offer autonomy and flexibility, they simultaneously impose new forms of control through algorithmic governance, performance metrics and opaque content moderation systems. These developments have prompted growing academic interest in the transformation of labour relations and the shifting balance of power between creative workers and platforms.

Traditional labour theory has often focused on the formal employment relationship, emphasizing the contractual and institutional ties between employers and employees. However, digital platforms tend to classify creative workers as "independent creators" or "collaborators", thus avoiding the responsibilities typically associated with formal employment. Although such designations appear to increase worker autonomy, they simultaneously obscure the significant extent to which platforms shape, monitor, and profit from the labour performed. This contradiction raises important questions about the nature of control and exploitation in platform-mediated work, and whether existing labour categories remain adequate [2].

This study aims to address three interrelated research questions. First, how do platforms govern and manage creative labour while maintaining the appearance of detachment? Second, to what extent do these practices amount to a new form of exploitation? Third, how do such developments challenge classical understandings of labour, value and

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workplace control? Given the limitations on conducting empirical fieldwork, this paper instead draws upon secondary data including published research, platform terms of service, and publicly available documents. Employing critical discourse analysis, the study will explore how platforms institutionalize managerial power through design, policy and algorithmic infrastructures.

The aim of this research is threefold. First, it seeks to unpack how digital platforms enact managerial control without formal employment structures. Second, it highlights the value asymmetries and labour devaluation embedded in platform governance. Third, it argues for a revised conceptualization of labour relations that accounts for the informal, yet systematic, regulation of creative work in the platform economy. By integrating theoretical perspectives with close textual analysis, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how labour is restructured under contemporary digital capitalism.

2. Literature Review

The emergence of digital platforms has transformed the structure and experience of labour across multiple domains, including the creative industries [3]. As platforms position themselves as intermediaries rather than employers, they introduce new modes of labour organization that challenge conventional understandings of work, control and value. This chapter critically reviews key themes in the governance of creative labour on digital platforms, focusing on three interconnected areas: platform governance and algorithmic control, the precarious autonomy of creative labour, and the transformation of labour relations under digital capitalism [4].

2.1. Platform Governance and Algorithmic Control

Digital platforms operate as infrastructures that facilitate access, distribution and monetization [5]. However, beneath their apparent neutrality lies a sophisticated system of control embedded within algorithms, recommendation mechanisms and performance-based incentives. Workers engaging with these systems are often unaware of the underlying mechanisms that determine their visibility, ranking, or monetization potential, yet their creative output is constantly shaped by such metrics [6].

Rather than exerting control through direct supervision or formal hierarchies, platforms rely on implicit governance [7]. This includes regulating when, how and what content is rewarded or suppressed, determining which creators gain exposure, and how income is calculated. As a result, creative labourers are incentivized to modify their behavior and output to align with platform preferences, even in the absence of formal direction. The platform thus becomes a silent manager, enforcing norms through infrastructure rather than commands.

2.2. Creative Labour and Precarious Autonomy

Creative labour is often framed in terms of self-expression, passion and autonomy [8]. This framing obscures the structural precarity and intense competition that characterize much of creative work. The individualization of responsibility, combined with the lack of collective protections, produces a working environment in which the pursuit of visibility and relevance becomes a full-time task, often extending well beyond paid engagements.

Platforms amplify this precarity by embedding labour within systems of continuous feedback, performance tracking and audience metrics. Creative labourers must remain constantly active, responsive and adaptive to fluctuating trends and algorithmic shifts. While they appear to operate with a high degree of freedom, their creative choices are conditioned by the need to maintain engagement, adhere to platform norms and compete for attention in saturated markets [9].

This situation gives rise to a paradox: the more autonomous the labour appears, the more deeply embedded it is in structures of performance-driven control. Autonomy is

reframed not as freedom from management, but as the capacity to self-optimize in line with platform logic.

2.3. Labour Relations in Digital Capitalism

The labour relations emerging within digital platforms are no longer easily captured by traditional categories. The binary of employer and employee is increasingly replaced by more ambiguous affiliations, such as users, creators or collaborators. These classifications enable platforms to shift legal and ethical responsibilities while continuing to extract value from the labour performed [10].

Control is exercised not through explicit contracts, but through systems of participation, reward and exclusion [11]. Participation becomes conditional upon compliance with evolving rules, and value extraction occurs through the monetization of attention, data, and content ownership models. This environment fosters a type of labour that is at once informal, distributed and intensely regulated.

New forms of exploitation have emerged, shifting from traditional wage-based relations to mechanisms of access control, content monetization rules, and data-driven visibility. Creative labourers contribute significant economic and cultural value, yet often lack formal recognition, protection or negotiation power. The platform's role in shaping these dynamics is central, as it controls both the technical infrastructure and the symbolic economy in which value is assigned and realized.

While these transformations affect a broad spectrum of workers, the creative sector is particularly exposed due to its reliance on audience engagement, reputational capital and content circulation. The intersection of creative autonomy and algorithmic governance produces a distinctive form of labour that is informal yet intensively governed, individualized yet collectively patterned, autonomous yet economically dependent.

3. Theoretical Framework

Understanding the management and exploitation of creative labour in platform contexts requires a rethinking of how control, autonomy and value are organized in the absence of formal employment structures. This chapter develops a conceptual framework to analyse the dynamics of platform-based creative work, drawing on critical theories of labour control, infrastructural governance and subjectivation.

3.1. Labour Process and Control without Employers

Traditional notions of labour control are typically grounded in hierarchical employment models, where oversight is exercised through direct supervision, contracts and institutionalized authority. However, within digital platforms, creative workers are not formally employed and are often positioned as independent agents. Despite this, their labour is closely structured by platform architecture, performance metrics and content policies [12].

Control in this context is exercised through indirect yet pervasive mechanisms. Instead of being managed by human supervisors, workers are guided by algorithmic systems that reward specific behaviors and content styles. These systems shape what is produced, when it is delivered and how it is circulated. As such, platform-based labour reveals a shift from explicit managerial oversight to embedded technical regulation.

3.2. Platform Governance as Infrastructural Management

Digital platforms exercise governance not by issuing commands, but by configuring environments. They design and maintain systems that determine access, visibility, monetization and participation. Through user interfaces, recommendation algorithms, and content moderation rules, platforms regulate creative labour at scale without directly intervening in individual decisions.

This form of governance operates through infrastructures that appear neutral but are, in reality, deeply shaped by normative assumptions. Workers are compelled to adapt to rules they do not set; optimize for systems they do not control and remain responsive to changes that are not transparent. Platform governance, in this sense, is not only technical but also norm-producing, shaping the conditions under which labour takes place and value is generated.

Furthermore, platforms externalize risk while internalizing reward, reinforcing their dominant position within the digital labour ecosystem. Labourers bear the burden of content creation, engagement strategies and audience cultivation, while platforms retain control over monetization flows, data ownership and algorithmic access. This asymmetry is maintained through contractual ambiguity and infrastructural opacity, which reinforces the platform's position as both facilitator and gatekeeper.

3.3. Subjectivity, Autonomy and De-labourisation

A central dimension of creative platform work is the way it shapes worker subjectivity. Creative workers are encouraged to see themselves not as employees but as entrepreneurs, personal brands or community builders. This narrative reconfigures the meaning of labour, embedding it in the language of personal growth, passion and lifestyle.

The shift towards self-management does not eliminate control; it merely internalizes it. Workers voluntarily monitor their performance, compare engagement metrics, and continuously adjust their output to meet platform expectations. Autonomy thus becomes a function of self-discipline aligned with platform logic, rather than independence from it.

Simultaneously, a broader process of "de-glamourization" occurs, wherein activities traditionally understood as labour are reframed as expression, creativity, or participation. This framing enables the platform to extract value from work that is not formally recognized as such. As the boundaries between work and play dissolve, creative labour becomes both more exploitative and more difficult to contest.

This theoretical framework, then, emphasizes three interlocking dynamics: the reconfiguration of labour control through technological infrastructures, the governance of labour through non-institutionalized mechanisms, and the ideological transformation of labour into personal expression. Together, these dynamics provide the analytical tools necessary to investigate how creative workers are managed, exploited and positioned within the platform economy, despite the absence of formal employment relationships.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology based on the critical analysis of secondary materials. In the absence of primary data collection, the research relies on existing documents, platform policy texts and publicly available narratives to examine how digital platforms govern creative labour and how such governance reflects broader shifts in labour relations. Instead of measuring platform practices quantitatively, this study focuses on decoding how control, value extraction, and subjectivity are embedded within the infrastructures and discourses of platform economies.

4.1. Research Approach

The research is grounded in a critical analytical approach that seeks to reveal the implicit mechanisms of control embedded in platform design, language and policy. This approach views digital platforms not merely as neutral technological tools, but as active agents that shape the conditions of creative labour. The study assumes that platforms communicate their managerial logic not only through their algorithms and monetization systems, but also through the ways in which they frame creator participation, success and responsibility.

Given this orientation, the research method prioritizes close reading, comparative interpretation and conceptual abstraction. The aim is not to catalogue isolated features of

platform labour, but to synthesize patterns that reveal systemic modes of control and exploitation.

4.2. Data Sources

The empirical materials analyzed in this study fall into three broad categories:

- 1) Platform policy texts: Terms of service, creator monetization policies, community guidelines and partnership programmes issued by platforms that host or facilitate creative content. These documents provide insight into the official framing of the labour relationship and the expectations placed upon creators.
- 2) Publicly available narratives: Media reports, blog posts, platform announcements, and creator testimonials. These sources serve to illustrate how governance structures are experienced, interpreted and contested by creative workers themselves.
- 3) Secondary literature and conceptual summaries: Where necessary, the study incorporates insights from prior research to contextualize findings, without relying on original data collection.

All sources are publicly accessible and selected based on their relevance to platform governance, creator labour and digital control mechanisms. A comparative strategy is employed, examining multiple platforms to highlight the variation and convergence of control logic across contexts.

4.3. Analytical Strategy

The analysis proceeds through a multi-step interpretive process. First, the selected documents and materials are examined for explicit references to labour regulation, such as performance thresholds, content eligibility, monetization terms, and creator obligations. Second, attention is paid to the discursive construction of autonomy, responsibility and success, especially where platform rhetoric invokes freedom, passion or empowerment.

Third, the study examines how platforms structure participation through infrastructural means, including algorithmic curation, incentive schemes and access restrictions. These elements are treated as integral to the governance architecture of the platform, shaping labour practices in ways that are indirect yet profoundly influential.

Finally, the findings are synthesized into a set of conceptual categories that reflect the central concerns of the study: management without employment, exploitation without wages, and visibility without recognition. This process allows for an abstraction from specific platforms to a more general theory of creative labour in the platform economy.

5. Platform Logics of Control and the Displacement of Traditional Labour Relations

5.1. Infrastructural Governance and Invisible Management

Digital platforms govern creative labour not through direct instruction, but by embedding control within the technical and procedural infrastructure. Visibility, discoverability and monetization are all determined by automated systems, whose underlying logics are largely opaque to creators. Performance thresholds, content eligibility standards and recommendation algorithms act as hidden managers, shaping what kinds of labour are rewarded and which creators are rendered marginal.

Rather than offering a neutral space for creativity, the platform environment produces strategic conditions for self-regulation. Creative workers are incentivized to tailor their content in response to metrics, engagement rates and algorithmic feedback. Success on platforms depends not only on creative skill but also on the ability to anticipate and adapt to constantly evolving governance systems (see Table 1).

Table 1. Layers of Platform Governance.

Layer	Governance Mechanism	Manifestation
Infrastructure	Technical Architecture	Access control, functional restrictions, content format limitations
Algorithmic	Visibility and Distribution	Recommendation systems, trending metrics, search result positioning
Policy	Formalized Rules	Terms of service, community guidelines, monetization eligibility
Ideological	Discursive Framing	Narratives of autonomy, success, and creativity; platform branding

This results in a form of managerial control that is decentralized across technical infrastructures yet persistently embedded in everyday creative practices. The absence of a direct employer does not eliminate managerial oversight, but rather reconstitutes it through code, ranking systems and operational terms that condition access to economic opportunity.

5.2. *Exploitation through Value Asymmetry*

While creators are responsible for content production, community building and audience retention, platforms retain ownership over the monetization infrastructure, advertising revenue and user data. This creates a significant asymmetry in value distribution, whereby the majority of economic gains accrue to the platform, even as the labour of content creation is externalized.

This form of exploitation is distinct from classical wage-based models. It does not rely on direct appropriation of labour time, but on the monetization of participation, reputation and data. Creative workers operate in a space where their activity generates revenue indirectly, yet they lack both transparency and bargaining power in relation to the financial mechanisms that determine their income.

Furthermore, the emotional and cognitive investment required to sustain platform visibility — often including unpaid time, online presence maintenance, and audience engagement — extends the boundaries of work beyond measurable labour. Yet this extended effort remains largely unrecognized and uncompensated, rendering vital creative activities economically invisible even as they are central to platform profitability.

5.3. *Reconfiguration of Labour Relations*

Platform-mediated creative labour blurs the lines between formal work, self-employment and digital participation. Creative workers are simultaneously positioned — as users who generate engagement, entrepreneurs who invest in self-branding, and content producers who supply the platform with material. This multiplicity enables platforms to disavow employer responsibilities while still shaping the conditions under which labour occurs.

At the discursive level, platforms often invoke narratives of empowerment, flexibility and self-realization. These narratives position creators as autonomous agents pursuing passion rather than performing labour. However, this ideological framing masks the reality of economic dependency, algorithmic discipline and platform-imposed norms.

Structurally, the absence of employment contracts, collective bargaining mechanisms or labour protections contributes to a de-institutionalization of labour. Creative work becomes governed by terms of service rather than labour law, mediated by metrics rather than management, and rewarded through algorithmic performance rather than negotiated wages.

This emerging configuration challenges the adequacy of existing labour categories by reflecting the broader trends of labour fragmentation and informalization under digital

capitalism. The creative worker on digital platforms is neither a traditional employee nor a fully independent contractor, but rather occupies a hybrid role that reflects the fragmentation and informalization of labour under digital capitalism. This ambiguity enables platforms to construct a labour force that is flexible, productive and easily replaceable, while remaining largely unaccountable for its conditions.

6. Discussion: Rethinking Labour and Exploitation in the Platform-Mediated Creative Economy

6.1. Beyond Employment: The Collapse of Traditional Labour Categories

Creative labour on digital platforms does not align neatly with established definitions of employment, freelancing or entrepreneurship. Workers are neither entirely autonomous nor formally subordinate, yet they remain subject to intensive regulation through algorithmic systems, platform policies and technical infrastructure. This ambiguity reveals the limits of existing labour models, which are often based on contractual formality, institutional clarity and visible managerial hierarchies.

In digital contexts, the distinction between labour and leisure becomes increasingly blurred, complicating the visibility of economic exploitation and the identification of labour practices. Workers are encouraged to integrate their identities, interests and emotions into their content. The result is a hybrid form of labour that merges performance with production and self-presentation with economic contribution. At the same time, creators' reliance on platforms for visibility, income, and infrastructural support entrenches their functional subordination.

The lack of a formal employment relationship should not be mistaken for the absence of control. Rather, it marks a transformation in how control is exercised. Platforms configure participation through design, algorithms and incentive structures, rather than through explicit instruction. This shift calls for new terminology to describe labour that is technically independent but materially constrained (see Figure 1).

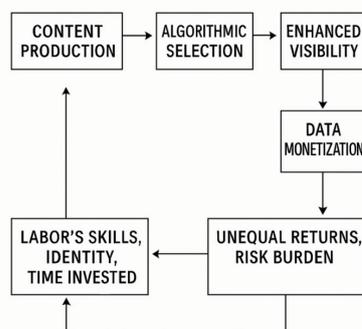


Figure 1. Exploitation without Employment: A Platform-Based Value Flow.

6.2. Reframing Exploitation in the Digital Economy

The dynamics of creative platform labour suggest that the concept of exploitation must be expanded beyond traditional notions of wage extraction. In these settings, exploitation manifests through mechanisms such as the commodification of attention, the monetization of user-generated content and the asymmetrical appropriation of data.

Creative workers generate value by producing content, cultivating communities and maintaining engagement. Yet much of this activity remains unpaid, underpaid or disconnected from revenue flows. Workers have limited transparency into monetization structures, while bearing disproportionate risks related to revenue volatility, fluctuating content visibility, and sudden platform policy shifts.

This form of exploitation is reinforced by the platform's narrative strategies. By promoting ideals of passion, flexibility and self-expression, platforms frame labour as voluntary, creative participation. In doing so, they obscure the material conditions under which value is produced and extracted. Workers are simultaneously positioned as both producers and commodities, with platforms mediating this dual role and reaping its benefits without bearing formal responsibility.

6.3. De-institutionalized Labour and the Politics of Recognition

The informal and fragmented character of platform labour presents substantial challenges for political and institutional recognition. In the absence of contracts, unions or collective protections, creative workers operate under conditions of individualization and structural invisibility. This not only limits their access to legal and economic safeguards, but also renders patterns of inequality difficult to contest.

The de-institutionalization of labour has significant consequences. It facilitates the normalization of precarity, obscures the systemic nature of exploitation, and weakens the capacity for collective negotiation or resistance. While a minority of individuals may thrive within these systems, the overarching model systematically privileges flexibility and replaceability over stability, equity, and institutional recognition.

Recognition is therefore not merely symbolic; it constitutes a necessary foundation for developing frameworks of redistribution, representation, and protection. If platform-based creative work is to be understood as labour in a meaningful sense, it must be examined not only as a cultural or expressive practice, but as an economic activity embedded in structures of governance, dependency and asymmetry.

7. Conclusion

This study underscores the urgent need to re-examine how creative labour is structured, governed, and exploited within the platform economy. Platforms have replaced traditional managerial hierarchies with infrastructures of control that operate invisibly yet pervasively. By configuring access, visibility, and monetization through algorithms and policies, platforms assert managerial power while systematically evading legal accountability. This has created a labour regime where autonomy is often illusory, and creators are incentivized to self-manage in line with platform-imposed norms.

The analysis demonstrates that traditional labour categories are increasingly inadequate for capturing the complexities of platform-mediated work. Creative workers occupy an ambiguous space, neither formal employees nor truly independent agents, where their contributions generate substantial value but remain structurally under-recognized and economically unstable. The ideology of freedom and passion disguises systemic inequalities and facilitates a new mode of exploitation grounded in participation rather than wages.

Addressing these challenges requires the development of a new conceptual and policy framework — one that recognizes platform-based creative labour as economically productive, structurally governed, and deserving of robust protections. Only by acknowledging the infrastructural and discursive mechanisms of control can we begin to construct frameworks that ensure fairness, visibility, and security for creative workers in the digital age.

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