

# A Relational Work Perspective on the Gig Economy Doing Creative Work on Digital Labour Platforms

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**A relational work perspective on the gig economy:  
Doing creative work on digital labour platforms**

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*Abstract*

Based on interviews with 49 visual artists, graphic designers and illustrators working on two leading global digital labour platforms, this article examines how creative workers perform relational work as a means of attenuating labour commodification, precarity, and algorithmic normativity. The article argues that creative work on online labour platforms, rather than being entirely controlled by depersonalised, anonymised and algorithm-driven labour market forces, is also infused in relational infrastructures whose upkeep, solidity and durability depends on the emotional efforts undertaken by workers to match economic transactions and their media of exchange to meaningful client relations. By applying a relational work perspective from economic sociology to the study of platform-mediated gig work, the article elucidates the micro-foundations of creative work in the digital gig economy, including how labour inequalities are produced and reproduced within and around micro-level interpersonal interactions.

*Keywords:* creative labour; creative work; digital labour platforms; gig economy; gig work; platform work; relational work; visual artists

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## **1. Introduction**

In parallel with the increasing number of services transitioning to platform-centred business models of delivery, recent years have seen a growing academic interest in the gig economy (Vallas and Schor, 2020; Wood et al., 2019a). Scholars have made particularly notable efforts in the study of types of gig work that require less specialised training, including microwork (Irani, 2015; Panteli et al., 2020) and locally-performed services such as food delivery (Gregory, 2021) and ride-hailing (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016). What all these types of gig work have in common is their mediation through platforms, i.e. online labour marketplaces (OLMs) that match providers of services (freelancers or independent contractors) with buyers of services (clients) on a mostly short-term and per-task basis (Howcroft and Bergvall-Kåreborn, 2019; Vallas and Schor, 2020). Given how commonplace it has now become to refer to platform-mediated job arrangements as ‘gig work’, however, it is notable that comparatively little research has thus far been conducted on creative professionals as prototypical gig workers (Flanagan, 2019). This is especially surprising since the seemingly ‘new modes of work’ in the gig economy (Ashford et al., 2018) are irrefutably modelled on the prototype of atypical project-by-project employment so prevalent in the creative industries in the form of short-term and contingent freelance work arrangements (Baym, 2018; Morgan and Nelligan, 2018). On the one hand, the burgeoning scholarship on gig work, occupied as it is with

pressing issues of precarity in the low-skill and locally performed gig economy, has generally been slow to examine platform work performed remotely by ‘cloud-based consultants’ and ‘web-based freelancers’ offering highly specialised professional and expert services, including creative work (Vallas and Schor, 2020; Wood et al., 2019a). On the other hand, studies of work in the creative industries have thus far adopted a narrow definition of ‘platforms’ that is mainly limited to ‘GAFAM’, i.e. Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft’ (Duffy et al., 2019: 1). In spite of creative work being the second most common occupation on OLMs after software programming (Kässi and Lehdonvirta, 2018), this work has not yet been subjected to systematic analysis (Sutherland et al., 2019), leaving the ways in which creative workers subjectively experience work on OLMs unexamined. The current paper addresses this gap in the literature through a focus on platform-mediated creative work that draws on 49 interviews with creative freelancers, including visual artists, graphic designers and illustrators operating on the Upwork and Fiverr OLMs. By focussing on creative gig work on these two major global cloud-based freelance platforms, this article provides a new and in-depth understanding of the ways in which creative workers experience work on OLMs.

Our initial analysis of the data from the 49 interviews revealed that personally meaningful experiences of gig work in the face of insecure and precarious platform labour conditions were contingent on workers negotiating, establishing and nurturing ‘intimate’ – i.e. friendly, convivial and durable – interpersonal relations with clients. Our findings contrast with existing accounts of gig work which paint what Schwartz (2018: 248) has influentially described as ‘an undersocialized’ picture of gig work in which workers are depicted ‘as isolated from clients and each other’. Studies of gig work typically build on a baseline assumption that ‘software applications unproblematically link workers to consumers or firms on the basis of impersonal optimization functions’ (Schwartz,

2018: 248); hence their tendency to define labour relations on OLMs as depersonalised, undifferentiated and standardised (Tubaro, 2021; Wood et al., 2019b), resulting in a deep sense of alienation and work intensification (Gandini, 2019). The observed importance of the establishment, nourishment and maintenance of intimate and durable interpersonal relations with clients that underpinned creative workers' experiences of meaningful work led us to make recursive 'abductive attempts' to 'fit' observations that countered existing accounts with 'fresh' theoretical perspectives in order to 'specify the conceptual boundaries of the phenomenon under examination' (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014: 84 and 86).

In this stage of our analysis we found that the 'relational work' perspective originally developed by Viviana Zelizer in economic sociology (2012; 2017) offered the most adequate conceptual frame with which to make sense of creative workers' experience of work on digital labour platforms. Economic sociology contends that economic actions and market transactions are neither independent nor isolated from social relations but are always interdependent with and embedded in relational interactions (Bandelj, 2009). People's efforts to align economic actions and market transactions with the negotiation, establishment, cultivation and dissolution of social ties all comprise what Zelizer (2012) has termed 'relational work'. Relational work thus refers to the processes in which people try to form and maintain 'good matches' or, by the same token, negotiate and terminate 'mismatches' between types of economic exchanges and types of social relations.

In this article, we elucidate, through such a relational lens, the ways in which creative workers perform relational work as an inextricable part of doing gig work on OLMs. We show how creative workers perform relational work by aligning commercial transactions for labour (e.g. money payments, reputation tokens) with the formation, cultivation, maintenance and termination of

intimate, friendly, collaborative and durable interpersonal relations with clients. Gig work, we argue, is embedded in relational infrastructures between clients and workers that necessitate the management of ‘good relational matches’. This relational work enables creative workers to assuage the precarity and labour commodification that arise in a context in which platform owners protect their business interests by reducing the client-worker relationship to an algorithmically-controlled, anonymized, impersonal, short-term and fragmented labour relation (Irani and Silberman, 2013) and by treating labour as a standardized and undifferentiated commodity to be ‘purchased or dispensed with on demand’ (Wood et al., 2019b: 942). While emphasising the role of relational work as a coping response to platform precarity and labour commodification that enables workers to reclaim autonomy from total algorithmic control and labour standardization, this article also sheds light on the downside of such work. We identify a set of insecurities, precarities and interpersonal forms of control that specifically arise from the relational nature of gig work and which only become visible to the researcher once a relational work perspective has been adopted. These include emotional burdens and overwork, such as the constant need to engage in time-consuming and energy-sapping activities to pander to, please or soothe demanding clients.

This article thus aims to contribute to the study of gig work by providing an empirical analysis of less-studied experiences of highly skilled creative work in the gig economy and by theorizing the long-neglected invisible work undertaken by gig workers to build and maintain long-term ties of affection, intimacy and care as the basis of economic action and labour practices in the platform-based gig economy. We argue that relational work may be more pronounced and overt in creative labour as creative workers, due to the nature of their work, perform longer-term, less-structured and innovation-oriented exchanges with clients than it is the case with delivery or transportation gigs—the type of gig work most prevalently studied.

## 2. Literature

### *When the algorithm becomes your boss: precarity, control and autonomy in platform work*

Studies of work in the gig economy have consistently found that although platforms offer workers a nominal degree of flexibility, freedom and autonomy to set their own schedules and to self-define work tasks, they also exercise excessive algorithmic control over labour, resulting in profoundly precarious, low-paid, insecure and burnout-inducing work (Gandini, 2019). Sociologists studying gig work define such algorithmic control mechanisms as complex assemblages of socio-technical supervision and management (Sutherland et al., 2020; Vallas and Schor, 2020). This form of algorithmic control is the outcome not only of the supervisory affordances immanent in platform technologies, including those enabling the close monitoring of worker efficiency through the tracking of idle time and the surveillance of labour processes, but also of ‘customer management’ whereby clients wield power over sellers of services via customer satisfaction reviews, rankings and rating evaluations (Wood et al., 2019a: 62). Unlike traditional organisations that establish centralised and hierarchical systems of authority with formal task routinisation and work regimentation aimed at ‘manufacturing worker consent’ (Burawoy, 1982), the locus of labour control in algorithmic management is dispersed across a decentralized bundle of human and non-human agents. On the one hand, algorithmic management ensures the acquiescence of workers by artificially concealing or obscuring the operative mechanisms of labour surveillance technologies; on the other hand, such management also outsources labour control to the informal disciplinary power of the marketplace itself by delegating power to the clients. Accordingly, algorithmic management has often been found to exercise ‘softer’ forms of control than traditional

management, including ‘reputational control’ via the imposition of ‘information asymmetries’ in which client-generated discretionary feedback, reviews and ratings (stars, likes) are calculated, interpreted and rendered actionable by largely inscrutable and opaque processes of automation and computation. These factors all directly affect the standing and visibility of gig workers on the platform and hence their ability to earn a living (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; Shapiro, 2018), since higher reputation scores correlate strongly with higher earnings on labour platforms (Gandini et al., 2016).

In accordance with this prevailing perspective of algorithmic management, the focus of many studies has been on examining the ways in which the socio-technical governance of platforms structures the behaviour of gig workers. While some scholars have emphasised the totalising entanglement of workers under a despotic and opaque form of data-based governance from which there is ‘no escape’ (Purcell and Brook, 2020; Newlands, 2020; Zuboff, 2019), others have sought to expose platform autonomy and its promise of flexible entrepreneurial labour as a kind of ‘false consciousness’ that ultimately coerces workers into docility and self-exploitation (Gandini, 2019; Shapiro, 2018). These latter scholars have shown, for example, how the infinitesimal scope of agency afforded workers on food delivery and ride-hailing platforms, including the freedom to reject or accept orders, to strategically geo-position themselves, to collect symbolic rewards and to self-schedule (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; Shapiro, 2018), in practice lends gig work a veneer of ‘fun’ which nonetheless imposes normative mechanisms of work gamification, thereby rendering workers complicit with the calculative and surveillant rationalities of the platform.

Other studies have probed the limits of algorithmic governance. These studies typically foreground the relational as opposed to the technological basis of worker agency, and by the same token also



highlight gig workers' resistance to algorithmic governance. In this way scholars have shown how it is the management of client relations that is the primary site of resistance to the 'reputational control' of algorithmic management. Indeed, this is found to be the case even though technically skilled platform workers can also regain autonomy in other ways, including by subverting the technical monitoring, data-capture and surveillant logic of algorithmic governance (Bucher et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2019a), or even by repurposing technical systems for collective worker mobilisation and labour solidarity (Cini and Goldmann, 2020; Panteli et al., 2020). Thus, gig workers have been found to forge alliances with clients, however ephemerally, in an effort to manipulate or 'game' the reputational system, while workers performing unskilled services locally in face-to-face encounters such as ride-hailing or food delivery have admitted to offering clients free bottles of water and free Internet to elicit positive ratings (Chan, 2019). Other studies of gig work have shown how sellers on eBay (Curchod et al., 2020) and property owners on TripAdvisor (Scott and Orlikowski, 2012) strategically manage client relations, for example by personalising packaging or offering complementary services to pre-empt negative customer feedback. All these studies have usefully elucidated the reputational machinations intrinsic to such surface-level performance of emotional labour, presented as consisting almost exclusively of ingratiating and manipulative relational efforts. Based on a general assumption that platforms are intentionally designed with the aim of effectively (algorithmically) mediating issues of trust in transient one-off transactional market relations between 'strangers' (Tubaro, 2021), gig work studies typically leave unexamined the complex relational processes, beyond crudely instrumental bonding, that underlie the formation and cultivation of friendly, longer-term ties in digital labour platforms. Aside from thick descriptions of the particularities of empirical cases, therefore, attempts to theorise the embeddedness of platform work and worker agency in relational infrastructure are still at a rudimentary stage.

Some sociologists have recently deployed Polanyi's concept of 'embeddedness' to study the social organisation of gig work. Paola Tubaro (2021: 8), for example, has argued that labour becomes disembedded from social relations when inter-individual economic ties are rendered 'thin' by platforms acting as market intermediaries, 'completely de-personalizing the labour relationship'. Wood et al. (2019b) have also drawn on Polanyi, though in this case to demonstrate how gig work, in spite of impersonal market mediation, is in fact embedded in social networks that positively affect economic outcomes on the platform. In treating social relations as largely distinct from or parallel to the impersonal and arm's-length market transactions of OLMs, however, Wood et al. (2019b) do not fully consider the intertwining of personal ties, payments and reputational metrics that underpin worker-client relations. This is because the focus of Wood et al.'s study is rather on a parallel sub-market for outsourced labour whereby highly reputed and popular online gig workers re-distribute tasks to friends, kin and colleagues.

In contrast to these previous approaches, this article mobilises the concept of relational work (Bandelj, 2020; Zelizer, 2012, 2017) to theorise the ways in which the performance of platform work is inextricably linked to and indistinguishable from workers' efforts at establishing, maintaining or dissolving long-term interpersonal relations of trust, intimacy and friendship with their paying clients as a mode of challenging the algorithmic control and governance of impersonal and anonymized labour relations.

### *The relational work perspective*

According to Viviana Zelizer (2012), relational work refers to the processes by which people establish, define, negotiate or terminate interpersonal ties (e.g. spousal, friendship and client

relations) through different types of economic transactions (e.g. gift-giving or bartering) and their media of exchange (e.g. money, time, stars and 'likes'). Individuals perform relational work to maintain, mark and erect boundaries between different types of relationships by resorting to a differentiated array of economic transactions and their media of exchange. Relational work thus refers to the process in which people try to form 'good matches' between types of economic exchanges and types of social relations.

Zelizer (2012) argues that the unit of analysis in relational work is the relational package, including the ways that people interpret, frame and negotiate the meaning of matching social ties with specific kinds of economic exchanges and labour practices. 'Relational packages' necessitate the setting up of boundaries around categories of social relations, e.g. by defining the meaning and meaningfulness of relational ties (such as romantic, spousal and neighbourly relations), articulating their expectations regarding the most 'appropriate' economic transactions for each meaningful relation (such as gifting, tipping, and donating), and hence also adopting certain media of exchange that seem suitable (e.g. money payments, favours, and gifts). A 'good match' thus arises if the meaning of a relationship is aligned with appropriate transactions and their media within the relational package; otherwise, 'relational mismatches' occur. For example, introducing money as a medium of exchange in a romantic relationship could create a relational mismatch by redefining the meaning of the relationship as prostitution; conversely, taking money out of a relation of sexual trade would by the same token transform a transactional activity into a relation of affection (Zelizer, 2017).

Although this framework was initially developed to study the interconnectedness between relations of intimacy, as for example relations between infants and parents and economic transactions

(Zelizer, 2005), it has also been fruitfully applied in the study of morally contested processes of labour commodification, including commercial sex work (Hoang, 2015), ‘bottle service’ nightlife economies (Mears, 2015), and egg donation in fertility clinics (Haylett, 2012). Such studies have elucidated the ways in which workers frame dubious labour exchanges with clients as appropriate by commingling and aligning market transactions and economic exchanges with meaningful, intimate and close relationships, all of which helps workers to redefine the meaning of their work and to resist labour commodification. Kimberly Hoang (2015) has for instance demonstrated how sex workers engage in elaborate rationalizations of what they do for a living, not only as a means of upholding their moral integrity but also of defending the economic soundness of their work. Hoang shows how sex workers achieve these ends by redefining and reclassifying the quality and nature of the particular relationship they have with the client, e.g. by specifically earmarking money earned from the sale of intimate labours. Large sums of money received from a ‘regular client’ or ‘a client-turned-boyfriend’ may thus be kept aside for ‘special purposes’, such as helping out their parents or investing in their own business, while payments from brief and transient client relationships are more likely to be spent on living expenses and one-off luxuries.

Following the relational work approach developed by Zelizer (2012; 2017), the analytical focus of this article is placed on the relational packages that underscore worker-client relations on online labour platforms. Once the unit of analysis in the study of platform work is shifted from algorithmic governance to relational packages, it becomes clear that payments (e.g. wages, contracting fees and reputational scores) are not merely the final outcome of impersonal transactions between workers and clients but are implicated in elaborate practical and emotional efforts to reclassify and convert anonymised, impersonal and commodified market relations into personally meaningful relationships of intimacy and affection.

While some recent studies of creative work have recognised that managing social relations is an integral part of work in the creative industries (Alacovska, 2018, 2021; Hair, 2021), most fall short of engaging substantively with the definition of relational work as developed in economic sociology. This limitation has led to an exclusive emphasis on the instrumental valance of labour invested in cultivating affective and intimate connections with audiences and fans, e.g. through artists' self-disclosure of their intimate lives on social media. Baym (2018: 20) has argued, for example, that the sole aim of 'relational labour' in creative work is to build social relationships with fans in order to secure paid employment. While not denying the instrumental values of relational work undertaken on labour platforms, including efforts to elicit positive feedback, this article seeks to elucidate the complexities of the interplay between the meaningful client ties, economic transactions and media of exchange that constitute the economic micro-foundation of platform work.

### **3. Method**

This study builds on a qualitative inquiry into how creative workers experience gig work in a labour context heavily mediated by precarity and algorithmic decision-making. Forty-nine interviews were conducted with creative workers who work as graphic designers, visual artists and illustrators on Upwork and Fiverr offering creative services such as book cover design, magazine and book illustrations, postcard design, family portraiture, pictorial decorations and similar.

The participants were recruited via Upwork and Fiverr, two of the largest OLMs worldwide. Client accounts were created on both platforms and a gig was posted seeking creative freelancers to partake in a research interview. We shortlisted 50 freelancers according to a set of diversification

criteria, including duration of platform membership, job completion rates, reputation level, gender and geographical location. In order to ensure good relational matches between researchers and freelancers, we offered payment equal to or higher than the rates set by the participants. This was important because we wanted to avoid reconfiguring the meaning of the research relationship as one of knowledge expropriation and exploitation, especially given the widely documented levels of precarity in this sector (Curchod et al., 2020). We interviewed 23 of the freelancers who had a high reputation on the platform, i.e. those with a job success score on Upwork higher than 90% and those with a five-star rating on Fiverr. We also interviewed 14 freelancers with middle-range scores, as well as 13 newcomers who had not yet attained job reputation. A total of 20 female and 30 male freelancers were interviewed for the study.

The interviewees were asked to narrate their platform work experience and to recall and describe any salient events or experiences, whether positive or negative, which they had encountered in this work. The interviews lasted 45 minutes on average. The participants included workers from the Americas (the USA, Brazil, Venezuela, Mexico, and Colombia), Asia (Thailand and Indonesia), Russia, Ukraine, and other European countries. English-language proficiency varied drastically between participants, and in order to facilitate unhindered discussion one of the authors conducted seven of the interviews in Italian, Macedonian, Serbian and Croatian while the rest were conducted in English. One interview was severely impeded by a language barrier and had to be discarded. All 49 interviews were translated and transcribed, resulting in 726 pages of text.

### *Analysis*

Our thematic analysis of the initial ten interviews revealed that the interviewees often reflected at considerable length, without being prompted, on the various ways in which they sought to build,

maintain or repair relationships with their clients. Across these conversations, the interviewees emphasised the importance of avoiding ‘bad’ clients, of the need to terminate ‘bad relations’ without acrimony (e.g. without triggering bad ratings), and of forging and maintaining long-term and friendly relationships with ‘good’ clients. Clients were variously cast as landlords or bosses, as well as friends or collaborators and even partners. In moving between data and extant theorisations of gig work, we observed a significant variance in our data (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). Namely, the predominant emphasis on ‘relational issues’ in gig work observed in our interviewees’ accounts did not ‘fit’ squarely with extant mainstream theorisations of gig work that posit gig work as an ‘undersocialized’ type of work (Schwartz, 2018) characterised by impersonal, standardized and algorithmically determined labour relations (e.g. Duggan et al., 2020; Tubaro, 2021).

In accordance with an abductive approach to data analysis, we set about searching for ‘alternative’ theoretical ‘encasings’ to ‘fit in’ this observed variance (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012: 124), eventually coming to adopt the relational work perspective (Zelizer, 2012; 2017) as a theoretical lens through which to make sense of the ‘relational issues’ evident in our dataset. Following abductive analysis, we then started seeking more empirical instances of ‘relational work’, ultimately deciding to ‘redirect’ the focus of the remainder of the empirical study (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012) towards an investigation of how creative freelancers perform relational work on OLMs by matching, blending and interweaving economic and labour transactions with social relations. Although this shift in the focus of the inquiry following our initial analysis did not lead to a fundamental restructuring of the remaining interviews, a note was added to the interview guide highlighting the need to stay attuned to relational work and to allocate sufficient time for exploring this aspect of experiences of platform labour. Accordingly, the interview data was coded

specifically for references to interpersonal ties (e.g. conceptualisations of the clients as *bosses*, *friends*, *colleagues*, *partners*), economic/social transactions (e.g. *gift-giving*, *pre-investing*, *tipping*) and any mentions of potential media of exchange (e.g. *ratings*, *success scores*, *time*, *money*, *personal information*, *care*).

#### **4. Relational work performed by creative workers on online labour platforms**

All of the creative workers interviewed, regardless of their reputational level or the extent of their economic dependence on the platform, described performing copious amounts of relational work. For example, every worker interviewed declared that by establishing long-term relationships, ‘partnerships’ and even ‘friendships’ with clients, they had managed to attain and sustain at least some scope of autonomy from algorithmically dictated, impersonal and standardised gig work, however negligible that scope. Moreover, the informants typically offered *relational* explanations of the control and autonomy they experienced in platform work. In their accounts of exchanging their creative labour on the platform, for example, they typically distinguished meaningful experiences of work according to their individual perceptions of the quality of their personal attachments to the clients purchasing their labour. Rather than approaching clients as anonymous and detached, the gig workers actively sought to induce convivial and pleasant emotions in their transactional encounters with a view to positively influencing the economic outcomes while minimizing the intrinsic uncertainties, anonymity and precarity of market-based relations characteristic of OLMs (Gandini, 2019; Wood et al., 2019b). Below we outline the empirical dynamics of relational work through which the gig workers in our study endeavoured to attenuate labour precarity and render labour commodification more tolerable.



*Donating time-collecting stars: establishing 'good relational matches'*

Many of the interviewed creative workers regarded the initial bidding proposal stage involved in competing for commissions on the platform as a crucial step in building strong relationships with clients. Often it was through the exchanges involved in this initial proposal that a 'good rapport' was first established. Many study participants had not only developed high levels of literacy in 'self-presentation' in order to stand out as especially professional and competent in a highly competitive OLM (Sutherland et al., 2020) but had also honed techniques for discerning and establishing good relational matches. Such techniques involved the investment of what might seem an inordinate amount of time and effort in getting to know potential clients, including their tastes, preferred styles of work, and hiring histories. The workers undertook careful scrutiny of gig descriptions, for example, as well as intense research of ancillary documentation such as company websites, press coverage, social media repositories, geo-locative information, etc. All of these efforts appeared to have the primary purpose of gleaning as much knowledge as possible about the client in order to facilitate a seamless personalisation of the market exchange of labour. According to the interviewees, personalising the marketised transaction of labour in this way necessitated the formation of convivial relationships with clients. Valeria (32, Italy) explained that the most important thing she learned in her three-year's long online freelancing career is 'client due diligence':

I spend a lot of time to prepare the proposal. It is crucial to get  
to know the client. To address the client by name to know  
where they live or what they do, to know how much it is fine

to charge. You have to establish a good rapport to get the job...

*Interviewer:* How do you do this?

I google the people for example – find as much info about them as possible. Once I was preparing a proposal - it was a children's book writer commissioning an illustrator. I googled her, found some obscure local magazine feature of her, then I saw her house in the pictures - a big nice house stylishly decorated. So she had money to pay. Her other book was stylish as well, so I adjusted the price, the style and the tone of the proposal. I told her I also had two kids. So we bonded. I got the job. We still work together.

The time and effort devoted by the creative workers to the preparation of winning proposals, despite being unpaid, was widely considered to be an indispensable investment as a self-enterprising means of relationship-building with potential clients. The interview data further showed time to be a desirable economic currency for creative workers in OLMs in another sense, with many interviewees reporting the diverse ways in which they had lubricated relations with clients by offering gifts of time that amounted to unpaid work. These offers could take the form of unlimited complimentary revisions of drawings, for example, multiple character versioning for free, non-contracted and free-of-charge additional features in the artwork, extra colouring, etc. The interviewees depicted these gifts of time as donations-cum-investments intended to nurture relations of reciprocity and goodwill and thus to create the right emotional tone to induce clients' future generosity, especially in their rankings, scores and evaluations of the workers' performance. Such gifts of time were given by workers in exchange for their clients' token currency in the form

of symbolic payments of stars, badges and likes. The gifting of time was thus depicted as an integral part of emotional calibration and of negotiating positions of inequality by all interviewed creative workers but especially by those who were new to the platform. Rick (31, Mexico), for example, who has been on the platform for ‘only a month’ at the time of the interview, explained:

I’m relatively new to the platform and I have to admit that I do a lot of free work for clients as I have not yet got a well-established reputation. I now have a ‘Rising Star’ badge but I have to keep momentum. ... Clients easily become angry if you don’t do free reiterations of the artistic concepts and endless rounds of revisions.

This has to be endured. I hope it will pay out later.

In any gift-giving relationship, incongruities inevitably arise in expectations regarding the frequency, size and costs of gifts, thereby often revealing deep-seated power asymmetries that engender relational mismatches (Zelizer, 2017). In the case of creative platform workers this asymmetry emerged as their gifts of time often resulted in relational mismatches that effectively turned them into self-exploitative and overworked subjects, especially those not yet in possession of ‘reputational capital’. The token currencies that flow within bounded institutions, such as for example prisons, are often part of ‘strong attempts to control others’ (Zelizer, 2017: 26). Through this lens, the reputational tokens, stars and badges circulating within the bounds of platforms serve as currencies that calibrate the relational ties between gig workers and clients and hence also regulate the terms of labour exchange. The controlling power of these token currencies was confirmed in the accounts given by experienced creative workers, who said they had to constantly negotiate emotions, monetary pay, gifts of time and quality of work in managing their relations with clients, especially since these clients wield considerable power over workers through their discretionary – and often in practice, whimsical – use of symbolic payments. Alexandro (43, US)

who despite having had an impeccable job success rate at the time of the interview, still struggled to come to grips with the ‘disproportionate power bad client relations wield on one’s livelihood’:

My concern is when clients don’t like the rendering of the portrait or the design. It’s not whether it was turned in on time, it’s just the people that I involved in my heart, they look at the drawing and say it doesn’t look like them - “That’s not what I wanted. These colors are wrong. This doesn’t look like me. This isn’t what I asked you to do.” ... And then they could be calling you names, they could be just being abusive. They’re obviously frustrated. They obviously don’t really know what it is that they want, but they want you to do it. You keep trying and they keep sending for revisions and I keep doing the revision, keep sending it back. And after all of that they cancel the order or they approve the order and give you the worst review.

In response, many of the creative workers interviewed had developed strategies to ensure timely detection of unethical or ‘difficult clients’ intent on preying on the less powerful and the desperate. Indeed such strategies were considered crucial to fend off potential relational mismatches that could damage their earning capacity on the platform. The workers thus stayed hyper-vigilant and attuned to any ‘worrisome’ cues that might be hidden in the tone of a client’s messages, levels of responsiveness and bodily comportment of clients in interviews, ever on the lookout for any sign that might indicate a relational mismatch and/or a potentially detrimental bond. Such watchful performance of relational work is typically aimed at precluding the establishment of ‘corrosive’ relations, though also a means of terminating already existing relations without jeopardising their ratings on the platform. Some of the interviewees reported having terminated contracts with

‘difficult’ clients by foregoing payments for delivered artworks, for example, in order to attenuate any potential acrimony and thus pre-empt negative feedback. Even though Betty (32, Poland) could not afford to lose pay, she tended to terminate every contract with a ‘nasty client’ in order to mitigate her fear from what she perceived is ‘a totally incomprehensible, capricious and unreliable rating algorithm’. By dissolving relational mismatches, Betty reclaimed agency; she resisted being ‘trapped’ in the all-encompassing dystopian techno-world of ranking algorithms, as vividly illustrated by her fleeting reference to popular culture:

It’s easier for me to give money back or half of the money and say, “Okay, don’t give me bad ratings. ... I’ll give you all the files but I just have to stop with this project, it’s just not working or something.” To avoid hard feelings and hard disputes. I don’t know but this rating system, it always reminds me of some technological trap. Tech scare ... Did you watch *Black Mirror*?

*Exchanging intimacy and affection: maintaining durable relationships of partnership and friendship*

The need for building ‘long-term client relations’ (Burhan, 34, Turkey), a ‘stable client base’ (Victor, 32, Spain) and for ‘turning clients into partners’ (Petar, 28, North Macedonia) as a means of overcoming the precarity and insecurity of platform work was frequently emphasised by the interviewees. Transforming a worker-client relationship from an essentially transactional relation mediated by an impersonal and algorithmically managed marketplace into a relation of trust, care, intimacy and security necessitates the incessant and elaborate performance of relational work. Some of the workers interviewed, especially those with multi-year tenure on the platform, such as Lora (42, the US) even compared their relationships with clients to ‘a long-term commitment’:

I have some 40% returning or continuous clients and 60% new clients. ... I have very symbiotic relations with returning clients. ... You know it's like that love relationship with the handyman. Once you've found a good one able to do things then you want him in the house every time you need something fixed.

The building of sustainable relational infrastructures on the platform was deemed the most effective safety net in conditions of insecure, precarious and contingent gig work. Strong relations with clients provide the security of a steady influx of jobs, guaranteeing a desirable level of job quality and even career progression through the construction of a portfolio. Goran (37, Serbia) and Rodrigo (26, Mexico) despite having worked for nearly two years on the platform at the time of the interview, still struggled to make a living from gig work. They both aspired to building 'regular' and 'stable' client relations as the foundation for a future secure income:

But you see my main goal is getting more of the regular clients on book or magazine illustration because there I make illustrations that go directly to my portfolio. I'm satisfied with that work and I feel that my illustrated profile and professional profile grow together.  
(Goran)

It's a safety net [...] So in the future I hope to build a strong client base, basically not having to worry so much about applying for new jobs as much as just giving a regular client the work they need whenever their own clients need something from them. (Rodrigo)

In accordance with this priority placed on stability, many creative workers invested sustained efforts in turning relations of commodified labour into relations of affection and intimacy, employing a wide range of techniques to personalise exchanges of labour and refashion what would otherwise be standardised, contract-driven commercial relations into durable, intimate and affectional relations of friends or partners. Exchanges of intimacy and affection helped creative workers in this endeavour to re-classify the nature of their work relationships as partnerships and even friendships. In most cases such exchanges included a degree of intimate sharing of self-disclosures about personal lives as explained by two freelancers, Tommy (29, the US) and Olga (32, Slovakia), who both maintained a superb reputation on the platform throughout their multi-year tenure on the platform:

Discussing kids and dogs and vacations and everything – that for me is a good part of the job. If someone wants me to illustrate a book they’ve written about two kids or something, two brothers, then I’ll ask them if their characters are based on real people – and if so to please send me photos and I will try to catch some resemblance. And of course that opens the door to some long personal dialogues, yeah.  
(Tommy)

I’ve worked with this one writer - I think this is our seventh year. She writes children books about a Minou cat. Her books are very boring - not my taste. When she contacted me for a second time some years ago, I hesitated. But she is super nice to work with. And so I consider this a very valuable relationship. I kind of love this woman

– yeah – like a grandmother with whom you talk everyday stuff  
about kids, fixing dinner, going to the park... (Olga)

In their efforts to cement semi-permanent work relationships as relations of friendship, creative gig workers and their clients alike have been found to invent, construct and circulate an array of ‘alternative’ and ‘intimate currencies’ (Zelizer, 2017). In the case of the creative workers interviewed for this study, such currencies included hand-drawn birthday cards, bespoke prints on t-shirts, tailor-made digital greetings, memes and gifs, etc. The design of such personalised currencies allowed gifts to flow and acquire meaning and value only within the specific worker-client relationship, thereby distinctly demarcating it as an intimate and durable tie. The exchange of intimate currencies in this way effectively served to particularise otherwise generalised client-worker relationships on the platform. Sofia (37, Russia) who considered herself ‘a veteran illustrator’ with more than 12 years of freelancing online, has pondered the gift-exchanges and intimacy-building practices she pursued with some of her more regular clients:

It’s very important to have good relationships with the client. ...

I have many clients I’ve worked with for more than three or four years. If you need to illustrate the whole book - and very often a whole book series - then you have so much time to discuss things and we speak about the design. So we became partners that codesign together. We became friends also on Facebook and she comments on my web posts. She sends greetings for Christmas – like she writes original limericks. But I tend to be very personal. I always send specially designed birthdays cards for her three children.



The importance placed on the establishment of personalised and durable worker-client relations inherently contradicts the logic of disciplinary control exercised in OLMs. Such significant investment in relational work ultimately serves to recast transactional market relationships between strangers into intimate interpersonal relationships, thereby rendering the platform's external arbitrage of trust and dispute-resolution between anonymous buyers and sellers obsolete. Indeed it is for this very reason that platforms actively suppress relational work by building elaborate relational architecture to regulate and prevent worker-client interactions beyond the bounds of the marketplaces, for example by strictly penalising off-platform communications, monitoring worker-client communications and similar dissuasive measures. Notwithstanding such disciplining relational control, many of the creative workers interviewed were nonetheless able to bypass the platform and 'do creative business' in an unmediated, interpersonal and autonomous manner, primarily as a result of their investment in relational work.

#### *Gifting money: tips and bonuses*

Exchanges of intimacy and affection were not the only means by which the creative workers interviewed sought to redefine the worker-client relationship. Various types of monetary payments such as tips and bonuses were used to help blur the boundaries of a principally market relation and convert it into a personalised and intimate relation. As gifts of money, tips may be perceived as an 'emotional supplement to the wage' (Zelizer, 2017: 94), generally taking the form of singular transfers of money that personalise commercial exchanges. For Valeria (32, Italy) tips did not occur frequently, but when they did, they were 'a sign of a satisfied client' and 'extra monies to be spent on luxuries':

I once illustrated a nice book about depression and psychogenic pain. And this client, he was saying in this book, you have to read the book when you illustrate it, that he was always trying to please people ... he gave me tips for every picture, exactly 30% of the price. He liked pleasing others and I much appreciated that. ... I bought some expensive cosmetics then.

Many creative workers emphasised that it was not the size of the bonus that made the difference but the form and meaning of this gesture. For them the transfer of tips denoted a genuine appreciation of freelancers and of work well done, as well as being a form of appreciation that challenged the platform's controlling valence of token payments in the form of stars, badges and likes. For Petar (28, North Macedonia) who has worked on the platform for almost five years when we interviewed him, receiving tips from clients surpassed pecuniary benefit as the monetary gifts obtained gave him a 'sense of pride in a job well-done':

That feeling that rushes in your veins when you get the bonus is so pleasing. You've made somebody happy and that somebody appreciates you. And it doesn't really matter if you got 5 dollars or a hundred – it's the gesture of goodwill that matters. And you immediately forge some connection to that client. I have a client that gives me a large bonus for my birthday every year. This is the third year in a row.

Some of the participants said they refused to accept tips, however, even though their livelihoods heavily depended on the platform income, regarding tips as signalling the inferiority of creative workers and as exempting clients from paying higher wages. In most cases, this refusal to accept

tips served as a powerful act of indicating a relational mismatch and making a potent symbolic declaration of dignity and autonomy from ‘corrosive’ client demands, as well as signalling solidarity with other freelancers. Barton (36, Italy) perceived the gifts of money as a form of exploitation and had consistently rejected them even though, ‘some extra cash could have boosted the meagre pay from the platform’. By refusing to accept the bonus, Barton attempted to redress the interpersonal power imbalance on the platform and to reclaim, however symbolically, autonomy from ‘unscrupulous clients’:

I don’t like tips. I work for wages and that’s that. Once I remember there was a client - a very very difficult client with some insane revision demands. Back and forth many times. I felt exploited. In the end one of the characters I developed happened to please him so much that when closing the contract he paid a bonus. I declined it. Hope he learned from it will consider next when exploiting freelancers.

Tips inject a different meaning into worker-client relationships. Gig workers and clients on labour platforms simultaneously connect and transact using different currencies, including gifts of money, to mark their relationships either as thriving ‘good matches’ or faltering ‘relational mismatches’.

## **6. Discussion and conclusion**

This article has identified and elucidated some of the elaborate and agile ways in which creative workers build solid relational infrastructures as essential economic micro-foundations of their work in OLMs. In so doing, the article extends recent scholarship that has emphasised the salience of ‘relational’ skills as a vital means of ‘thriving’ and ‘surviving’ in platform-based gig work (Ashford

et al., 2018; Sutherland et al., 2020). We hope to have shown that that creative gig work is deeply enmeshed in relational infrastructures that require the continuous establishment, cultivation and dissolution of relational ties. Creative work, we argue, is thus inseparable from gig workers' elaborate and incessant efforts to match labour exchanges with meaningful and durable interpersonal client ties. This perspective challenges prevalent claims that OLMs have disembedded gig work from social relations via complex socio-technical rating and reputational systems (Gandini, 2019; Wood et al., 2019b) that have minimized the previously high transaction costs of stranger-to-stranger market exchanges by reducing the worker-client relation to a depersonalised, standardized and anonymised labour relation that no longer requires inter-individual trust-negotiation (Tubaro, 2021; Schwartz, 2018).

The relational work performed between clients and workers helps, in effect, to attenuate labour precarity and insecurity on labour platforms and helps individuals carve out spaces of meaningfulness and autonomy in labour contexts that are otherwise characterised by a high degree of labour control and a loss of autonomy (Gandini, 2019). For the creative workers we interviewed, the forging of longer-term and personally meaningful ties with clients offered them a sense of agency and control over the frequency and volume of gigs that were otherwise subject to the vagaries and ephemerality of market transactions. Such relational work is not without costs, however, since pandering to fussy clients, putting up with demands disproportionate to remuneration, and gifting time to produce 'positive vibes' are all time-consuming, burnout-inducing and energy-sapping activities. By applying a relational work perspective to gig work, we make visible these 'hidden costs' and 'invisible' emotional burdens that arise from the need to maintain, cultivate and repair client relations, showing how these relational efforts undertaken by workers actually serve to exacerbate rather than alleviate precarity and labour control. By focusing

on the ways in which creative workers reconfigure commodified and transient labour relations into durable relations of friendship, affection and intimacy, we elucidate patterns of precarity and interpersonal forms of labour control that have hitherto remained obscured in studies of gig work. In so doing, our study contributes an alternative approach to analysing issues of power in OLMs.

The introduction and institution of alternative media of exchange in labour relations, including gifts of time, tips, and other personalised currencies, rebalances the distribution of power between buyers and sellers of labour. From a relational work perspective, it appears that labour inequalities in gig work are produced and reproduced within and around interpersonal micro-level interactions (Schor et al., 2016). Paradoxically, these interactions serve to promote overwork and self-exploitation among workers, including underpayment. By offering gifts of time in the form of free labour and by accepting gifts of money in the form of tips or bonuses in lieu of higher fees, workers succumb to the power of clients while occupying social positions of victimization and powerlessness.

Finally, with the article we hope to contribute an empirical analysis of a less-studied type of platform-based gig work, i.e. creative work on digital labour platforms. The findings regarding the prevalence of long-term, convivial and collaborative ties between workers and clients in platform-based creative work contest the arguments made in extant studies of microwork and local service delivery platforms that proclaim the primacy of fleeting, short-lived and merely ingratiating relations in such work (Chan, 2019; Curchod et al, 2020; Irani and Silberman, 2013). The nature of creative work, no doubt, plays into the necessity of conducting relational work and forging longer-lasting client relations (Alacovska, 2018). Creative work entails a higher degree of innovative problem-solving, personalised expression and idiosyncratic styles and thus requires

singularized labour, personal involvement and identifiable expressive abilities (Ryan, 1992: 44-45). In this sense creative work may frustrate the anonymisation and standardization of the labour process, in contrast with low-skilled gig work that is characterised by the fragmentation of labour processes into a multitude of miniscule, de-skilled and spatio-temporally distributed tasks that lead to more transitory and instrumental worker-client relations (Irani and Silverman, 2013). Nevertheless, it should also be noted that the majority of creative workers have traditionally performed ‘unnamed or formatted labour’, typically appearing in the labour process as ‘generalized, undifferentiated artists’ who perform creative work according to ‘formats’ producing ‘more or less similar paintings, writings or music’ (Ryan, 1992: 44). OLMs have brought such creative labour formatting to new levels, reconfiguring it ever more forcefully into a fleeting, undifferentiated and impersonal transaction. The quest of online creative freelancers to gain autonomy via relational work therefore cannot be divested from creative workers’ traditional quest to perform personalized, named and singularised rather than generalized, impersonal and undifferentiated labour. Studies of relational work in the gig economy should thus, we argue, take into careful consideration the specific nature and content of labour on OLMs.

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