Here, There, or Everywhere? The Multi-Platform Practices of Creative Freelancers in Sweden[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the cross-platform and multiple-income strategies by which Swedish creative freelancers make a living in the platform economy. Through qualitative interviews and digital ethnography, the article explores how they use and interconnect a variety of platforms to manage precarious careers and piece together patchworks of income from platform-mediated gigs and non-waged income sources. The results show how creative workers manage their dependence on everchanging platforms and algorithms by diversifying their online presence and building personal ecologies of interconnected platforms to spread risk, retain autonomy vis-à-vis platforms, and stabilize incomes. It is argued that while creative workers use multi-platform practices as strategies for dealing with systematic uncertainty, these practices are also increasingly imposed as necessary in environments where creative labor is being mediated through platforms.

KEYWORDS

affordances / algorithms / creative industries / cultural work / gig economy / multi-platform practices / platform labor

Introduction

The platformization of work has become the subject of both political debate and a growing body of research. While much research on the so-called gig economy has focused on work in the service, food delivery, and transport sectors (e.g., Banasiak & Jesnes 2024; Rosenblat & Stark 2016; Schor et al. 2020; Woodcock 2020), platforms are also reshaping cultural and creative labor in distinct ways that are less researched in the Nordics. In Sweden, the creative industries are among the sectors where platforms have had the most profound effects and where non-standard work is most common (Ilsøe et al. 2021; Palm 2019). However, there are few Nordic studies of how platforms transform the working life of creative workers. This is somewhat surprising, considering that the atypical and insecure work of self-employed artists and creative freelancers arguably is a model that has been transposed to the broader gig economy (Alacovska et al. 2024).

Early techno-optimistic narratives that the platform economy would lead to a 'participatory culture' (cf. Jenkins 2006) and democratize cultural production have today gradually given way for more sober accounts of how platforms create precarity and dependence for creative workers, leading to intensified global competition and pressures to engage in unpaid, enterprising labor (Duffy et al. 2021; Glatt 2022; Poell et al. 2022). This article acknowledges the often precarious and exploitative conditions of creative platform work but seeks to nuance the gloomiest accounts in the literature by

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emphasizing the agency of creative workers to strategically navigate the hazards of the platform economy.

Drawing on interviews with 23 creative freelancers as well as digital ethnography, the aim of this article is to answer how creative freelancers in Sweden navigate the platform economy to find work and manage platform-based forms of precarity. To do so, it ties into emerging research on multi-platform practices in the creative industries (cf. Ens 2024; Hair et al. 2022; Scolere, 2019). Much previous research on platform work in the Nordics is done as case studies of specific labor platforms. While a narrow focus on specific platforms can be essential for understanding the intricacies of algorithmic management and control, I argue that a focus on how creative workers navigate ecologies of multiple platforms better capture their everyday strategies and struggles. To this end, this article moves beyond the prevailing approach by instead centering the everyday practices of creative workers in navigating a 'structured opportunity space' (Ibert et al. 2022:569) of many different platforms, competing for their time and attention. Here, the article contributes to calls for a more 'holistic approach to the platformization of cultural production' (Poell et al. 2022:17) that seeks to understand how creative workers manage their careers over diversified platform ecosystems. Doing so, I seek to answer: what multi-platform practices and strategies do creative freelancers in Sweden employ to manage their careers?

The article is structured as follows. In the next two sections, I present a general background to creative freelancing in the Nordics and the platformization of creative work. Then, I discuss theoretical points of departure for analyzing multi-platform practices. After that follows a section on methods and data. The article then analyzes different dimensions of how creative workers manage multiple platforms, before presenting the main conclusions in a final discussion.

Creative freelancing in Sweden

With freelancers, this article refers to workers who either are solo self-employed or who use umbrella companies for invoicing. In the Nordics, between 5 and 10% of all workers were solo self-employed in 2019. Around 6% of the Swedish workforce was solo self-employed in the same year, but the level is higher (about 17%) in the creative industries (Ilsøe et al. 2021). Similarly, the creative industries are among the sectors where umbrella companies—companies that for a fee handle freelancers' administrative duties such as invoicing and paying taxes—are most common in Sweden (Ilsøe et al. 2021).

The creative industries have long before platformization been more reliant on freelance and project labor than many other sectors (Cohen 2016). Creative work is characterized by well-known tensions between precarity and passion and by the large incorporation of subjectivity and affect into the labor process (Banks 2007; Duffy 2017). Nørholm Lundin's study (2022) of Swedish freelance musicians show that they engage in extensive emotional labor and conflicted negotiations of belonging, recognition, and sense of place. Creative workers have been characterized as 'role models' (de Peuter 2014) and 'guinea pigs' (McRobbie 2016:35) for testing out the flexible and precarious careers of micro-entrepreneurship that now characterize the gig economy. Often driven by ideas of self-realization, they may willingly seek out uncertain careers, even framing insecurity and risk as desirable and exciting (Karlsson 2024; Lorey 2015).

For freelancers, spatial and temporal boundaries between work and non-work are often blurry: working evenings and weekends is normalized, and unpaid entrepreneurial tasks like self-promotion, networking, and strategizing may take considerable time (Bologna 2018).

Compared to other European welfare systems, the Nordic welfare models have been characterized as relatively inclusive for solo self-employed workers in terms of social and economic protection (Eurofound 2017). Nonetheless, Nordic freelancers may face extensive difficulties accessing unemployment benefits or social security originally designed for permanent employees (Ilsøe et al. 2021; Norbäck 2022). The Nordic labor market model is a consensus-oriented, voluntarist model where permanent employment has long been the norm, and where wages and working conditions are set through the collective bargaining of unions and employer organizations rather than through legislation (Ilsøe & Söderqvist 2023; Kjellberg 2017). In Sweden specifically, labor laws and social security systems are built 'on the assumption of permanent full-time employment rather than short-term contracts and self-employment' (Movitz & Sandberg 2009:252). As freelancers typically lack collective agreements and have no legislated minimum wages, they are left to negotiate wages and conditions on their own and generally earn less than their employed counterparts (Flisbäck 2011; Norbäck 2022).

As shown in both Nordic and international research, creative freelancers often have 'portfolio careers' (Ashton 2015; Fraser & Gold 2016) and multiple jobs (Gerber 2017; Pouliakas & Conen 2023; Throsby & Zednik 2011), typically combining commissions and projects for multiple employers with side-jobs and part time employment outside of the creative industries (Karlsson & Gerber 2025; Lindström 2016). Norbäck (2022) shows how Swedish freelance journalists manage often precarious careers by networking, being 'jack of all trades', and bundling together jobs. Freelancers often drift between periodic overwork and unemployment and may face long uncompensated periods between commissions when they must still search for gigs, market themselves, and take side jobs (Norbäck 2022). A survey of Swedish artistic workers (Flisbäck 2011) finds that they earn less and work more (46 hours per week in 2008) than the Swedish average. One-third reported having had six employers or more during 2008 and, on average, they spent 71 % of their work time on directly creative or artistic work.

The platformization of creative work

Platforms are 'data infrastructures that facilitate, aggregate, monetize, and govern interactions between end-users and content and service providers' (Poell et al. 2022:5). The platformization of creative work describes the processes by which creative industries and cultural labor become increasingly shaped by, mediated through, and dependent on the economic, governmental, and infrastructural elements of platform companies. Platformization is however no monolithic process. While platforms in Marxist terms may be described as new 'points of production' (Gandini et al. 2024) with new mechanisms of extraction and exploitation (Altenried 2024), platforms may also create distinct opportunities for creative workers.

There is an abundance of typologies in the platform labor literature, partly reflecting what Jarrett (2022:24) recently called a 'peculiar schism' between studies of social media platforms on one hand and studies of labor platforms on the other hand. Gandini

et al. (2024) distinguish three kinds of platform work that are of relevance for this article: (1) platform-*based* work where the platform oversees the capital-labor relationship and utilizes algorithmic management (i.e., gig work through labor platforms like Uber or Upwork); (2) platform-*mediated* work, where transactions and communication between workers and clients are carried out over platforms that do not directly control the labor process (e.g., freelancers finding clients over social media platforms like Facebook or Instagram); and (3) platform-*dependent* work of professional content creators, streamers, or influencers who produce, distribute, and monetize cultural content through platforms in novel ways.

While *platform-based* work through 'local' labor platforms in the service sectors has dominated the discussion about the gig economy, there has also been research conducted on 'remote' freelance platforms like Upwork and Fiverr that intermediate creative and technical work globally (Alacovska et al. 2024; Schwartz 2018; Wood & Lehdonvirta 2022). Such platforms challenge existing ways of organizing work through algorithmic management, piece-based compensation, and internal rating and ranking systems (cf. Altenried 2024; Laursen et al. 2021). Surveys show that labor platforms only mediate a small percentage of labor market transactions: for most creative workers, platform-based work is a complementary source of income (Ilsøe et al. 2021; Palm 2019; Piasna et al. 2022).

For creative workers, social media and portfolio platforms can be just as crucial for how they find commissions and communicate with clients. Such *platform-mediated* work may exacerbate the winner-takes-all character of creative markets, as affordable digital technologies accelerate the imbalance between the supply of aspirational workers and the limited demand for their services (cf. Menger 2014). Creative labor markets are reputational markets (Gandini 2016), and platforms create both new opportunities and challenges to build personal brands, reputations, and networks on different platforms, governed by algorithmic and metrics-based logics of visibility (Duffy et al. 2021). By building creative portfolios on Bēhance (Scolere 2019) or engaging in 'relational labor' (Baym 2015) with followers, freelancers may valorize their self-brands to attract clients and job opportunities. Rather than replacing the role of traditional networks and practices, platforms complement them in ways which make online and offline spheres interdependent (Ibert et al. 2022).

Platform-dependent work has finally been studied in relation to content creators, influencers, video game streamers, and other creators who find new ways of monetizing and commodifying creativity through platforms. By selling goods online, engaging in crowdfunding or influencer marketing, or monetizing blogs or YouTube channels, creative workers may complement income from commissions or side-jobs with non-waged income streams enabled by platforms (Glatt 2022; Hair et al. 2022). Bonifacio et al. (2021) analyze the relational labor of creators who build relations with fans who support them through the crowdfunding platform Patreon. They show the tensions that arise when financial support becomes dependent on upholding transactional relationships over platforms. Johnson and Woodcock (2019) explore the strategies of videogame streamers on Twitch, who through diverse platform affordances, including donations, advertising, subscriptions, sponsorships, and gamification practices monetize their content. Ens (2024) and Ravenelle (2023) both study the opportunities for digital 'side-hustles' through platforms for retail and commerce platforms, often demanding considerable labor.

The kinds of platform work outlined above all increase the unpaid work that creative workers are expected to do to. Platforms allow especially young workers with middle-class backgrounds to engage in unpaid 'aspirational labor' (Duffy 2017) where they market themselves and take on cheap gigs, often compensated by little else than vague promises of exposure and future work. There are important gendered patterns here, as explored in Duffy's study (2017) of fashion bloggers that analyzes the intense pressures to engage in uncompensated, feminized forms of self-promotion while balancing 'authentic' self-expression with sponsored content. As Duffy et al. (2021) argue, visibility is not only a promise but also a source of precarity for creative platform workers. The volatility of platform metrics, rankings, markets, algorithms, audiences, and trends create uncertainty for creators that must spend considerable time on continuously adapting their practices to opaque algorithms. What Bucher (2018) calls the 'threat of algorithmic invisibility' means that creators continuously must adapt their creative output, engaging in platform-specific forms of 'visibility labor' (Abidin 2016) such as using hashtags in particular ways or adapting content, language and practices to a platform's 'cultural scripts', interfaces, and community norms. Despite the meritocratic discourses underpinning these markets, studies like Glatt (2022) show how they tend to reproduce both gendered and racialized forms of inequality.

Multi-platform practices in the creative industries

While the studies discussed above illuminate important elements of the platformization of creative labor, the tendency in the literature to focus on specific platforms conceal the practices by which creative workers strategically *combine* different platforms. This article adapts an approach centering creators' *multi-platform practices*. Rather than looking at platforms in isolation, such an approach emphasizes their relationality and interconnectedness (van Dijck et al. 2018). The platform economy can here be seen as a 'polymedia' environment (Madianou & Miller 2013) or a 'dynamic cross-platform ecology' (Poell et al. 2022:110) where platforms are defined in relation to each other. Creative freelancers are embedded within this ecology where different platforms compete for their time, attention, data, and engagement, and where they must strategically navigate different options.

Multi-platform practices are defined by tensions between structure and agency. As a 'structured opportunity space' (Ibert et al. 2022:569), the platform economy allows users to act in their own interests, while simultaneously shaping, restricting, and steering actions. Platforms typically seek to control, enclose, and capture value from users. Through algorithms, metrics, fluctuating models of monetization, opaque regimes of visibility, and the control of user data, they restrict the autonomy of freelancers (Hair et al. 2022). Being dependent on a single platform may in this context indeed cause precarity, as platforms, algorithms, and rules for monetization might suddenly change, audiences fluctuate, or visibility be restricted. However, by strategically combining platforms in a personal platform ecology (Scolere 2019), freelancers can navigate different options and risks, potentially retaining some autonomy and offsetting the risks of being dependent on just one platform.

A useful concept here is *affordances* (Gibson 1984). For creative freelancers, the platform economy provides 'an environment of affordances' (Madianou & Miller

2013:170) that both enable and restrict actions. Affordances can be understood as a set of possible actions permitted within a structural milieu, such as a platform. As Davis (2020:6) writes, '[t]echnologies don't make people do things but instead, push, pull, enable, and constrain'. Rather than determining actions, platforms steer them by setting up boundaries for what can and cannot be done. Davis (2020:65) suggests this is done through specific 'mechanisms of affordance', characterized by different levels of force, such as *requesting*, *demanding*, *encouraging*, *discouraging*, or *refusing* particular actions. Importantly, affordances may enable actions not intended by platform companies and engineers, in ways that may let freelancers resist, subvert, tweak, and appropriate platforms for their own purposes (see Ettlinger 2018).

By strategically linking together platforms when self-marketing (Duffy et al. 2021), building portfolios (Scolere 2019), or combing diverse income stream (Ravenelle 2023), creative workers may manage uncertainty by appropriating diverse audiences and platform features into their own personal media ecology. As Ibert et al. (2022) point out, the practices of integrating platforms differ depending on if platforms have similar or different types of affordances. They argue that platforms with different affordances allow both *sequential practices* (e.g., using Instagram for self-marketing and Upwork for securing gigs) and *bridging practices* (e.g., starting a membership program on Patreon and then marketing it in Facebook groups to mobilize followers). Platforms with similar affordances may be used for *parallel practices* (marketing oneself with the same content on both Instagram and Snapchat) and *parasitic practices* (signing up for two similar labor platforms like Upwork and Fiverr that both require considerable investments in terms of time, effort, and money before, potentially, paying off).

While multi-platform practices can increase outreach, reduce dependence, and create opportunities for income and visibility, using many platforms also increases workload (Hair et al. 2022). Scolere (2019) shows how the 'portfolio careers' of graphic designers are reconfigured through social media and portfolio platforms like Instagram, Bēhance, and Dribbble. These platforms intensify the pressures to brand the self and to adapt creative content and marketing to the affordances, algorithms, and interfaces of specific platforms. This puts pressure on developing digital literacies (Sutherland et al. 2020) by researching platforms, consuming 'algorithmic gossip' (Bishop 2019) and developing imaginaries of platform affordances and audiences (Bucher 2018; Nagy & Neff 2015).

This article contributes with knowledge on how creative freelancers manage themselves in multi-platform environments, showing how this is both imposed as necessary by platform companies and embraced as a strategy by creative workers.

Methods and data

This article is based on a dissertation project (Karlsson 2024) utilizing digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews. The data was collected between 2020 and 2023. The present article primarily draws on the interview data from 23 creative freelancers in Sweden who use platforms extensively in their work. This data is occasionally complemented with observational data from the platforms that freelancers frequent. The study used a theoretical sampling approach which is associated with grounded theory (Charmaz 2014) and approaches the collection and analysis of data as interconnected

processes. Most interviewees were identified and contacted directly through platforms like Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Upwork, Bēhance, and Illustratörcentrum. When recruiting, I looked for participants who were (1) freelancing creative workers and (2) who use platforms extensively to find and carry out work. The sample is thus not representative for the highly heterogenous group of creative freelancers, where many might not use platforms to the extent that my participants did.

When recruiting, I looked strategically for respondents who could widen and nuance the understanding of my case by maximizing the variation in the sample (Becker 1998). I interviewed 12 women and 11 men between 24 and 56 years old. As the focus of the study is on how creative freelancers navigate *different* platforms, I recruited participants from several creative fields to maximize variation and to detect both commonalities and differences. The sample includes illustrators, graphic designers, photographers, digital content creators, and filmmakers. However, in line with McRobbie's (2016:27) observation that being a 'multi-skilled creative' is the new normal for cultural workers, participants usually mixed different types of creative expertise and commissions. A participant primarily identifying as an illustrator might, for instance, also do commissions in graphic design, web design, and photography to make ends meet. The interviewees were generally well educated, often in areas of communication, design, or the arts.

While the analytical focus is on how creative workers use platforms, most interviewees do, in line with the longer history of portfolio careers (Ashton 2015), combine platform-based with non-platform-based incomes. Participants typically combined commissions for advertising agencies, cultural institutions, municipalities, and commercial brands, with other kinds of income from within or outside the creative industries. Some had part-time jobs outside of their 'core' (Throsby & Zednik 2011) creative expertise: a couple worked extra in health or elderly care, two others at cinemas, and one at a radio station. Although none primarily identified as artists, several combined commercial assignments with artistic practice on the side, and a few gained additional income from art grants. While I did not directly ask about annual earnings, I talked extensively with most interviewees about their financial situation. Most (though not all) expressed that they were or had been struggling financially, and all reported highly fluctuating levels of income. Low earnings were common, and several interviewees were anxious of un(der) employment, of not being able to support themselves and their families, and of having low pensions in the future. However, for some, this insecurity was offset somewhat by networks or family, such as having a partner with a full-time job.

Most interviews were conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic through video conferencing tools like Zoom and Skype. Four interviews were done over telephone and three in person. The length of the interviews ranged from 1 hour to 2.5 hours, being on average around 90 minutes. Interviews were transcribed and coded in the NVivo software package. After transcribing, I read through the transcripts several times and looked for both descriptive and analytical themes of how the participants utilize different platforms for work, income, visibility, and managing insecurity. The analytical process was abductive (Tavory & Timmermans 2014) and has involved going back and forth between developing the empirical and theoretical arguments.

All interviewees have given their informed consent to participating, and they were informed about the purpose of the study beforehand. Their names used in this manuscript are pseudonyms. The project has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

Results

In the following, I present four themes that have emerged as particularly important from my data regarding creative freelancers' multi-platform practices: negotiations of how many platforms to use, issues of control and autonomy when developing a personal platform ecology, how platforms reshape creativity, and strategies for developing atypical income streams. These categories detail different practices, roughly summarized in Table 1. While these practices may sometimes be combined for synergetic effects (cf. Ibert et al. 2022), they may also clash or take time away from each other, resulting in difficulties for freelancers to know which practices and platforms to prioritize.

Table 1 Overview of the multi-platform practices of creative freelancers

Practices	Purpose	Associated challenges and risks
Building an interlinked presence over several platforms.	Reducing platform dependence and risks of algorithmic invisibility.	Work intensification and heavy investment of unpaid labor and resources.
Having a platform with permissive affordances as a 'base', from which to extend out and 'fish' for clients elsewhere.	Retain control over terms, self-presentation, and reputation vis-à-vis more restrictive or enclosing platforms.	Missing out on audiences, metrics, and clients of more restrictive platforms; risks of violating platform terms and conditions.
Adapting creative content and portfolios to platform-specific affordances.	Increase engagement, reach, and chances of being discovered.	Creative practices increasingly being dictated by platforms; supplying free content to platforms.
Establishing non-waged digital incomes and 'side hustles' (sales, crowdfunding, passive incomes, influencer marketing, affiliate marketing, etc.).	Stabilize income during periods with little commissioned work; increase creative autonomy.	Often neglectable incomes; diverts attention and time from better paid work; requires considerable relational and entrepreneurial labor.

Here, there, or everywhere? Developing a multi-platform presence

The multi-platform practices of the interviewees involve interlinking platforms with different affordances for self-promotion, networking, relational labor, finding gigs and commissions, getting support from the freelance community, and establishing supplementary incomes. While their degree of dependence (cf. Poell et al. 2022) on platforms varied, all interviewees attested to the importance of digital platforms for how they find gigs and market themselves. The response from freelance photographer and blogger Eva is typical: 'I mean, it's everything really. *All* customers find [me] either through Instagram, Google, or Pinterest'. While she detailed how her offline networks were also important, she maintained that most of her clients today contacted her through Instagram or after finding their way to her blog through other platforms, and that she couldn't keep her company afloat otherwise. Illustrator Erik, when asked how he found commissions, similarly said:

> Those things are so weird. […] Sometimes, when I post an image via some website or Illustratörcentrum or Instagram, then it spreads [and clients contact me]. But if I contact a client or advertising agency directly and [...] hunt commissions that way, the old-fashioned way, it's unusual that I get anything. […] I'm more dependent on them contacting me because they've discovered me. […] And that's special. It's an uncertainty in the industry.

Both Eva and Erik expressed that conscious efforts at self-marketing and contacting potential clients would seldom amount to much, whereas online posts they didn't think much about sometimes could generate much attention and attracting clients. They, as well as other interviewees, therefore emphasized the importance of self-marketing on many different platforms to increase their chances of being seen *somewhere*, thus producing productive synergies between the platforms (cf. Ibert et al. 2022).

Being dependent on one platform is in my data regularly framed as risky and precarious due to data lock-in, opaque metrics, or sudden changes to algorithms and platforms. Practices like 'shadow banning' or non-transparent moderation were sometimes invoked. One illustrator told me of her Instagram account once being closed for a month for supposed content violation due to illustrations depicting nudity, after which she experienced it much more difficult to reach out with her content. Having a presence on several platforms can here be a buffer against algorithmic invisibility (Bucher 2018) or suddenly losing traction. Illustrator Elinor, who said that she got all her commissions through digital platforms, reflected:

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

Elinor frames a multi-platform presence as a strategy for 'immunizing' herself to platform precarity (cf. Lorey 2015), arguing it is a big risk to become too dependent on any one platform. By being on several platforms, she guards herself against sudden changes to algorithms, fluctuating traffic trends, or the risk of platforms closing altogether.

When deciding if a platform belongs within their personal platform ecology (cf. Scolere 2019), freelancers must strategically evaluate platform affordances, algorithms, and audiences based on their imaginaries of them (Nagy & Neff 2015). However, this can be confusing. Illustrator Olof said that he tries to be active on as many platforms as possible to maximize his chances of being discovered, but he also described the platform economy as a 'jungle' where it is never apparent which alternatives will work:

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

The uncertainty over how to best navigate the platform economy was for Olof a source of anxiety and stress that made it difficult to decide which platforms to invest time and

energy in. He used the platform Bēhance as his main portfolio and combined it with the Swedish hiring platform Illustratörcentrum, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, Facebook, and a personal website. Investing time in the wrong platforms can be costly, potentially impacting the chances of maintaining a career. Being on many platforms requires much time, effort, unpaid work, and sometimes monetary fees. Participants expressed spending much time on researching platform algorithms and continuously developing new technological and communicative skills by engaging in networks and communities of social cooperation (cf. Fumagalli et al. 2019). Some spent late evenings while their family were asleep studying new platforms to develop digital literacies (Sutherland et al. 2020), while others took expensive courses in social media management or digital communication to learn how to better promote their companies.

While being on many platforms can reduce dependency, it also increases the pressure on actively producing content for them to create engagement. Having new content to post was a general stress. The filmmaker and social media manager Patrik reflected that you must find a balance between quality and quantity. He said that 'a big challenge for me is that feeding content to social media can easily be a full-time job—there are no limits to how much [you can do] really'. While he had previously tried to update his profiles every day, including weekends, that took a toll on his mental health. He had now opted for a slower pace, using scheduling software to upload content at strategic times. Speaking of the different social media platforms he currently used for marketing his business, he reasoned that he had to set limits for himself:

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

While 'being everywhere' is an ideal among some participants, Patrik reasoned that it is impossible to do so if one wants to retain a meaningful dialogue on all of them (cf. Abidin 2016). Being on too many platforms might mean that one does not get the time to adequately adapt to their specific demands, thus investing time and effort that may not pay off in the end. Similarly, the need to regularly supply content to platforms to increase engagement such as views, likes, and followings was often described by participants as a hassle that took time away from the work they really wanted to do. As Gandini et al. (2024) note, this forces creative workers to become digital 'content creators' whether they like it or not, as this may be necessary for keeping their companies afloat.

Control and autonomy when building a personal platform ecology

Power and control are central dimensions for how platforms reshape creative labor. As Wood and Lehdonvirta (2022) argue, while platforms may give freelancers autonomy to pick and choose clients from all over the world, they simultaneously create new relations of dependence to the platforms themselves. Seen as 'points of production' (Gandini et

al. 2024) that extract and generate value from users, platforms have interest in keeping users within their own ecosystems and making them dependent on their metrics, audiences, and affordances. Compared to other highly dependent platform workers in the service sector (Schor et al. 2020), creative workers may however have more possibilities to leverage their broader reputation through multi-platform practices, thus combining platforms that afford them a relative degree of autonomy when self-marketing, networking, or seeking gigs.

When negotiating which platforms to incorporate in their personal platform ecology (Scolere 2019), interviewees commonly reflected on issues of control and autonomy. It was common to use one or a couple of specific platforms as an 'base' online, which they use to branch off into other platforms. One participant said that 'your company needs a digital home', while others talked about having a digital 'hub' or 'showroom'. This was often a website, a blog, or an Instagram page, which is then connected with other platforms to attract different audiences. Graphic designer Adam used a wide range of platforms where he posted different types of content. He found most commissions through Facebook and LinkedIn but also used Instagram to market his art, YouTube to share his creative process, and Bēhance as a graphic design portfolio. His base was however his website, from which he linked to his accounts at other platforms, effectively 'bridging' them (cf. Ibert et al. 2022). Asked about the importance of his personal website, he said:

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

Adam compares finding clients to fishing, with his website being a figurative fishing rod with which he catches clients from other milieus—in his case, mainly by 'casting out hooks' in Facebook groups or LinkedIn. He tried to build up trust through strategic impression management (cf. Goffman 1990) on his website to convince clients he was the right person to hire, then linking to his website on Bēhance, Facebook, LinkedIn, and other platforms.

Based on his imaginaries of platform affordances, graphic designer José described his website as his 'storefront' which affords him more control over his self-presentation than the algorithmic feed of Instagram or the algorithmic management of Upwork. He complained that it had become more difficult to gain traction on Instagram than it had been previously due to changes to their algorithms, and that he found the format of their feed visually restricting. He compared this to his website: 'On my website, I know that clients will see everything exactly as I intend them to. It's like, "I'm the one in control". It's more of a curated experience that way'. At the same time, he expressed that it was 'impossible' to get traffic to his website on its own, and therefore, he linked to it in his profiles at Instagram and the portfolio platform Bēhance through interfaces like the following (Figure 1):

Figure 1. Screenshot of a Bēhance-profile allowing the interlinking with other platforms through its interface.
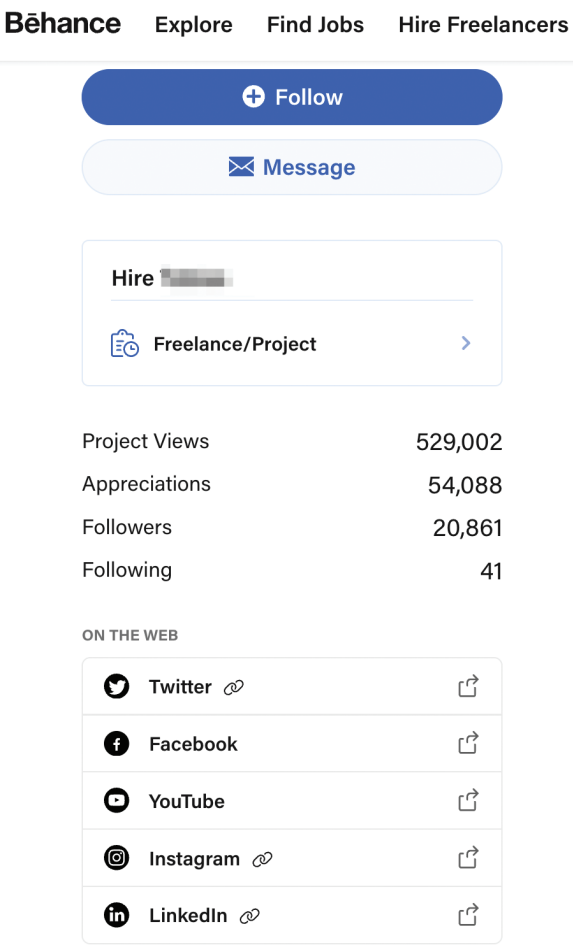
As Davis (2020) argues, technological affordances may either encourage, discourage, or refuse particular actions. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Bēhance do, for instance, allow users to link their different accounts through the platforms' interfaces, thus encouraging multi-platform practices (Figure 1). In contrast, the affordances of some platforms are highly restrictive and refuse interlinking platforms. An example are global freelance platforms for creative work, like Upwork or Fiverr. These platforms connect buyers and sellers of specific tasks through algorithmically curated feeds and take a fee of each transaction. Freelancers are rated by clients and their total score and awarded 'badges' or 'levels' factor into their chances of being discoverable and employable. Freelancers thus cannot leverage their broader reputation on other platforms. Elinor, who used Upwork for the occasional commission, complained that the platform was an enclosed ecology where she couldn't make use of her reputation and metrics

from elsewhere. She said: 'You become so dependent on the ratings customers give you. If you don't get all five stars, you're fucked basically. The algorithm won't promote you'.

Prices on Upwork and Fiverr are generally very low, being a way to gain a competitive advantage (Marà & Pulignano 2022). For freelancers in Sweden and the Nordics, it can be difficult to compete and get paid enough to cover living expenses. My participants were often critical of these platforms and saw them as threats to Swedish freelance markets. Graphic designer and illustrator Linus described them as a 'waste of time' that contribute to price dumping in Sweden, by allowing Swedish clients to hire cheap labor from other parts of the world. At the same time, both he and other interviewees described how they sometimes used these platforms to scout for interesting clients. The metaphor *fishing* returned in the interview with graphic designer José:

> I've used both Upwork and Fiverr to like, fish for clients [laugh]. They are great for finding interesting clients, but the pay and fees can be ridiculous. So, maybe do one gig within the platform for them, but then take them [the client] outside and do more gigs independently. That way you can escape the fee.

Upwork call such practices 'circumvention'. Their terms and conditions do not allow communication or deals outside of their platforms, and their affordances refuse workers to link to other social media. Upwork even censor the surnames of freelancers to make identification outside of their platform difficult. This way, the platform functions as a gatekeeper between freelancers and clients, which enables valuable data lock-in while making users dependent on the platform (Wood & Lehdonvirta 2022). Still, in both my observational and interview data, there are several instances where freelancers talk about how they use these platforms to seek clients and circumventing the platform, despite the risks of being deactivated. In Facebook groups for freelancers, I have observed several interactions like the following:

> Sanna: What's bad about them [Upwork and Fiverr] is that they take a 20% fee of what you earn for themselves, from all your clients. That means that you must take the client outside of the platform and deal with them independently. I always do that. Hell no that Upwork should take that much money from me ☺
>
> Lisa: But that is against their rules. You risk losing your account if you do that.
>
> Sanna: @Lisa: I don't care, I can't stand them. I only take maybe two clients out from there a year anyway. (from online observation).

By finding loopholes and strategies that afford them to bring clients outside of enclosed ecosystems and incorporate them into their own platform ecology, freelancers can develop a form of resistance against the power of labor platforms (Ettlinger 2018), which allow them to capitalize on their broader multi-platform reputation. While studies of crowdwork platforms have analyzed how users might resist unproportioned power on such platforms by organizing and seeking a collective voice (Wood & Lehdonvirta 2022), my data shows how multi-platform practices may allow other kinds of resistance, by bringing or 'fishing' clients out of enclosed systems.

Creativity in multi-platform environments

Building on the last section, platforms are also impacting the *creative* autonomy of free-lancers. One example is the need to curate a digital portfolio, extending the tradition of portfolio careers (Ashton 2015) to platforms. Interviewees detail spending considerable time on what could be called *portfolio work* (Karlsson 2024)—managing their multi-platformed portfolios, updating them with new artworks, adapting posts to platform affordances, but also strategically creating art or content that would look nice on specific platforms. Rather than solely being a new medium for marketing artworks produced elsewhere, interviewees regularly talked about how platform imaginaries impact what they produce, how, and why. An illustrative quote comes from content creator and photographer Matt:

> Often when I take photos for the portfolio, I imagine how they will look on Instagram. Like, "yeah, this will look good in the feed". And I adapt what I create according to that. So, the platform steers my creativity in a way.

While artistic workers have always had to balance creative autonomy with commercial concerns and expectations (Banks 2007), platforms add another layer where works are not only created with specific clients in mind, but also specific platforms. The affordances and interfaces of different platforms may be ideal for one type of content rather than another, encouraging certain types of content. Illustrator Elinor said:

> It's more work than most people realize. You can't just upload the same image […], [t]hey need to be in different sizes and ratios to look good. So, you must keep that in mind [when creating], like, "Which platform would this image look good on?

Following specific trends may also make it easier to achieve algorithmic visibility and find audiences. One graphic designer described how he a few years back had niched himself toward lettering (drawing letters by hand), because that at the time was a popular trend on Instagram that gave him much exposure. At the time of the interview, the trend had faltered, and he looked for another niche. Another illustrator similarly talked about how his imaginaries of the Instagram algorithm affected what kinds of images and photos he creates and uploads, compared to what he posts on his Bēhance profile:

> You know that photos of clouds always work there, while portraits of humans do not for some strange reason. […] Strict lines, architecture, minimalism, and stuff like that [works well] … when it is visually simple to interpret but with a little touch of something, that works. So, I try to take more photos like that. The algorithm likes that.
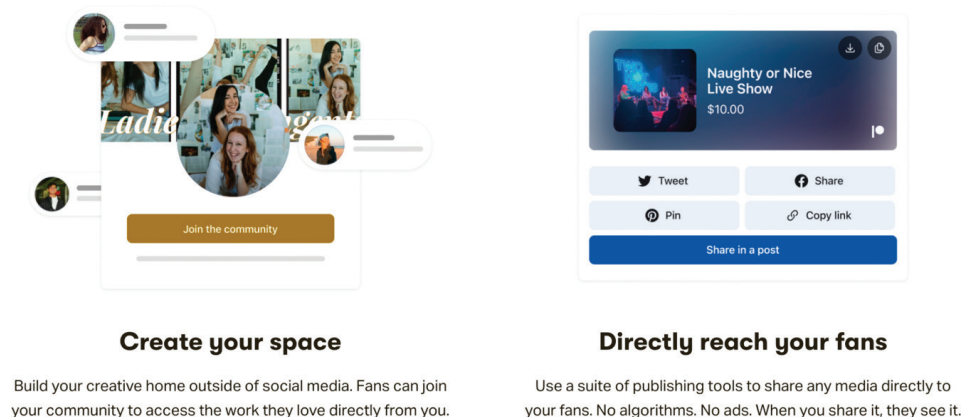
By adapting his creative practice to imaginaries of what the algorithm 'likes' and prioritizes, Erik tries to increase his chances of being discoverable. These practices often fall somewhere in between what Ibert et al. (2022) call parallel and parasitic practices: content can be reused on several similar platforms to increase outreach but may still need to be repurposed to suit specific platforms. Multi-platform practices can here afford freelancers a degree of flexibility to pick platforms which they think suit their creative style or niche the best. At the same time, platforms are no neutral medium for creative

expression: they also exercise power over creative processes, influencing what creators produce. The constant tweaking and adapting of content demand extensive labor. Graphic designer José said that 'I spend many hours every week just, you know, creating stuff for my blog and then tweaking it so that it suits Instagram. […] If you don't watch out, it can become a full-time job of its own'. While uncompensated, this supplies free content to platforms with business models dependent on free user-labor (Jarrett 2022).

Atypical income streams and digital hustling

Platforms can afford creative workers ways to diversify income stream beyond wages and commissions. Some scholars have recently talked of 'digital hustling' (Ens 2024; Ravenelle 2023) to conceptualize the search for economic opportunities beyond contracted labor. Several participants spent considerable time on diversifying income streams through e-commerce, content monetization, influencer collaborations, affiliate marketing on their blogs, creating digital lectures for education platforms, and crowd-funding through platforms like Patreon. Some described experimenting with 'passive incomes' as a strategy to cope with income instability and to supplement their main free-lance work with a 'safety net' (Ravenelle 2023:8) of extra income. These practices align well with the neoliberal ethos of platform capitalism, where individuals are encouraged to monetize their passions and 'do what they love' (Duffy 2017) through entrepreneurial risk-taking and strategizing. Such narratives are reproduced by platform companies like Etsy or Patreon, which market themselves as allowing users to control and commodify their creativity beyond corporate interests and opaque algorithms (see Figure 2):

Figure 2. How the crowdfunding platform Patreon market themselves.

Create your space

Build your creative home outside of social media. Fans can join your community to access the work they love directly from you.

Directly reach your fans

Use a suite of publishing tools to share any media directly to your fans. No algorithms. No ads. When you share it, they see it.

Crowdfunding platforms like Patreon embody the paradoxical promises of platform capitalism. While claiming to empower creators by offering direct access to audiences and bypassing corporate gatekeepers (Bonifacio et al. 2021), their reliance on transaction fees and network effects can reinforce inequalities. As Jarrett (2022) argues, platforms profit from the aspirational labor of creators while externalizing the risks and uncertainties of

market volatility. A study of Patreon earnings (Regner 2021) found that the top 1% of campaigns earned at least $2,500 monthly, while the vast majority attracted only negligible incomes. This concentration of success in the top underscores the structural barriers for smaller creators and the limitations of platforms' democratizing rhetoric.

Sara, a digital content creator and writer, diversified her income through influencer collaborations, public speaking, book publishing, and crowdfunding. Many of these initiatives consumed a lot of time and did not always pay off, at least not initially. She told me that her initial foray into influencer marketing required extensive groundwork, including learning about audience analysis, SEO optimization, and targeted content creation. Reflecting on her early unpaid efforts, she remarked: 'I put in an *extreme* amount of time. I planned for a year before I launched the blog about target group analysis and design and how the market worked, and I studied search engine optimization and all kinds of things'. Over time, when she established a more stable reputation, brands began approaching her directly to appear in her social media channels, though still not always offering her adequate compensation. To reduce her dependence on freelance commissions and make time for producing content directly to the audience of her blog, Sara had furthermore launched a membership program of Patreon where she offered exclusive content to subscribers:

> I do it so I can put more time on creating content generally [...] But it's very long-term work, it takes time. I haven't even ... I currently work towards 50 patrons. It's a very slow grind. But it has still given me positive effects based on this with the content creation, which I think makes it worth it anyway.

Despite her optimism, Sara struggled to grow her Patreon audience, and the platform's fees further diminished her earnings. Supplying followers with paywalled personal content also required lots of relational labor (Baym 2015), which took time away from more stable income sources. Ultimately, some months after our interview, she closed her Patreon, citing on her blog limited financial returns and the considerable time and energy required to sustain it. This experience illustrates the volatility and labor-intensive nature of such 'atypical' income streams, as well as the disillusionment that can arise when aspirational narratives fail to materialize.

Other participants experimented with web shops and e-commerce platforms. Photographer Matt sold framed prints of his photos through a personal web shop. He also regularly sold images to image banks and to e-commerce platforms that print photos on t-shirts, coffee cups, and other commodities, compensating creators with a certain small percentage of each sold item. While sales on these platforms were sporadic, he appreciated the occasional extra income, reflecting that:

> It doesn't pay a lot, but you know, it still trickles in some money now and then which is nice, sometimes when you have nothing else going. "Small streams make great rivers".

While the pay wasn't great in the short term, he reasoned that it might pay off in the long run and provide some extra security during periods without commissions. Rather than creating exclusively for these platforms, he tried to recycle photos that he had taken in other contexts, making them 'useful' rather than relegating them to a hard drive. Through sequential practices (Ibert et al. 2022), Matt used these platforms for complementary incomes that did not take too much time away from his main commissions.

In contrast, for some interviewees, side-hustles took time away from other work. Photographer Hanna supplemented commissions with affiliate marketing on her blog and selling photos to image banks. While hoping these practices would allow her to monetize her otherwise uncompensated downtime, she acknowledged the difficulty of balancing these efforts with her primary commissions. She told me that she was currently developing a web course on photography and online marketing for a Swedish learning platform that took much more time than she had anticipated. 'I don't even know if this will lead to anything, or if it's just wasted time', she said, as her compensation was dependent on how many signed up for the course. Another photographer, Susanne, had similarly launched an online course through another learning platform a while back. Although the course had generated some income, she faced pressure to self-market the course since the platform did little promotional work, resulting in her spending much more time than planned on the platform.

In conclusion, by encouraging individuals to monetize their passions and embrace entrepreneurial identities, platforms can extract value from their activities while deflecting attention from systemic inequalities (Glatt 2022). Side-hustles can offer creators a means of coping with precarious conditions by adding additional revenue and safety-nets, but this often seem to demand significant labor, for some creators potentially perpetuating the very instability such platforms claim to mitigate.

Concluding discussion

This article has shown how creative freelancers manage fragmented digital careers by building personal ecologies of interconnected platforms. As has been argued, to understand how platforms reconfigure the everyday experiences and conditions of creative workers, it is necessary to study their practices of navigating complex multi-platform environments characterized by a constant interplay between self-promotion, platform-mediated gigs, and atypical incomes.

The article contributes to the emerging literature on multi-platform practices among creative workers (Hair et al. 2022; Scolere 2019) by centering the everyday lives of freelancers in Sweden—a national context where such practices have been little studied. Previous studies on Swedish freelancers in arts, music, and journalism (e.g., Lindström 2016; Norbäck 2021, 2022; Nørholm Lundin 2022) have shown how practices like multiple jobholding, emotional labor, and adapting the position of a 'jack of all trades' are common. This article shows how such practices today are being mediated in new ways through platforms. In line with previous research, participants struggled with precarious freelance conditions, highly fluctuating incomes, and fears of falling through the cracks of Swedish social security systems badly attuned to solo self-employment. Multi-platform practices can be seen as a response to these socially imposed conditions, representing individualized, entrepreneurial strategies for resilience in a structural context of contingency. However, such strategies also expose the deeper systemic challenges that characterize digital labor markets, including uncertainty over which strategies will pay off, extensive unpaid labor, the emotional toll of constant self-promotion, and creative practices increasingly being dictated by platform affordances and algorithms.

While previous research has shown how platforms may expose creative workers to new forms of precarity, exploitation, algorithmic invisibility, and extensive unpaid work,

this article shows how multi-platform practices can allow workers to exert agency in relation to platform companies. By interlinking and bridging platforms, freelancers can leverage their skills by choosing platforms that may afford them relative control over their work. If specific platforms are too restrictive, turning to another platform or combining them in novel ways can give rise to productive synergies (Hair et al. 2022) or acts of resistance that work in favor of creators. However, using many platforms was often presented as something of a necessary evil. Turning themselves into content creators who continuously must supply platforms with free content requires considerable unpaid work and may take time away from core creative processes or actually paid commissions. Choosing which and how many platforms to use was a constant, anxiety-inducing struggle for interviewees: being everywhere is not possible, but betting on the 'wrong' platform may make it difficult to get ahead.

Norbäck (2021) has argued that the relative employment-security of employees in Sweden currently drive employers to hire freelancers instead, potentially creating a growing gap between the 'insiders' and 'outsiders' of the Swedish labor market. Platforms may further enforce this tendency by creating a global labor market where employers in Sweden and the Nordics can easily outsource labor to countries where freelance services are cheaper. While some respondents were positive about how platforms allow them to get in contact with clients in other parts of the world, many expressed fears of such outsourcing, potentially normalizing price-dumping also in Sweden and further worsening working conditions.

While the article has focused on the platform-practices of creative freelancers, this is not to deny the continued importance of offline spaces for creative work. Platform practices remain embedded within offline contexts where traditional networks, local clients, and side jobs remain important. Rather than replacing such elements that have a long history in the arts, platforms complement them with even more options, potentially leading to further fragmentation of already highly heterogenous labor markets. Yet, what effects platforms will have on Nordic labor markets for creative work is far from certain, as platforms in themselves are no inherent drivers of precarization. Future research could well investigate the complex overlaps between online and offline practices among creative workers, to better understand how platforms achieve 'change through continuity' in the creative industries.

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