

# In search of meaningful work on digital freelancing platforms: the case of design professionals

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*Growth of the platform economy has been accompanied by critiques of the fragmented, isolated and precarious nature of the employment it offers. Yet, little is known about how creative freelancers perceive the meaning of work on the platforms. Based on 40 interviews with freelancers, clients, platform owners and industry experts, this paper reveals that most freelancers are concerned about how operating through the platform, and their dependence on it, is undermining the meaningfulness of their work. Freelancers find that the platforms are eroding both the manifest (i.e. monetary) and latent (i.e. non-monetary) meaning of their work although they are mostly concerned about the latent element of meaning. The analysis reveals that the small group of freelancers who pursue meaningful work and earn a sustainable income on platforms are those with strong entrepreneurial orientation.*

**Keywords:** freelancing, meaningful work, platform economy, precarity, global labour, entrepreneurship.

## Introduction

The number of freelancers participating in digital freelancing platforms<sup>1</sup> has increased over the years to a point where most global platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, Upwork and Freelancer.com boast tens of millions of active members (Pongratz, 2018). According to recent statistics, the use of platforms is growing globally by more than 25 per cent per year (Lehdonvirta, 2018). Although some of these platforms focus on digital microwork where workers undertake small digital human-computing tasks such as tagging images and classifying text into categories, others provide opportunities for more creative and complete work experiences, such as designing a company's brand guidelines or logo, and programming a website (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft, 2013). This paper focuses on creative professionals on digital freelancing platforms to examine the 'meaningful work' construct in the context of platform economy jobs.

Different applications of the platform economy<sup>2</sup> have been described in a positive light as alleviating poverty (Hamari *et al.*, 2016), empowering ordinary people through

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entrepreneurship and offering upward mobility (Holtgrewe, 2014; Schor, 2016); as well as in a negative light as 'neoliberalism on steroids' (Murillo *et al.*, 2017) and as undermining the rights of workers, causing millions to live with continuous worry and insecurity (BBC, 2017). While much has been written about the platform economy, this has tended to focus on microwork activities and little is known about how creative freelancers perceive the meaning of work on the platforms (Fieseler *et al.*, 2019). Do creative freelancers find their work on the platforms more meaningful, empowering and liberating compared to alternative work options? Or do they find themselves stuck with non-fulfilling and precarious work? In order to address these questions in this article, we develop an understanding of the prevailing work conditions in digital freelancing platforms and workers' perceptions of the meaning of their work.

Workers increasingly attach more significance to the meaning they attribute to work (Goins, 2015). In ethics literature, meaningful work is considered 'a fundamental human need' (Yeoman, 2014: 235) while Marxian political economy emphasises the importance of work as the means to realise the creative potential of an individual (Marx, 1977). Meaningful work in a holistic sense does not only meet people's economic (consumption) needs, but also provides them with creativity and freedom to express themselves in authentic ways (Spencer, 2015). Workers who are able to experience meaningful work by aligning their work with their own interests, skills, values and passions are claimed to also deliver a greater societal contribution through a deeper commitment to work (Duffy and Dik, 2013; Bailey and Madden, 2016). The creative workforce is particularly focused on 'meaningful work' as it is central to derive satisfaction from work beyond the simple means of earning a living, as expressed by Huws (2010: 510):

The [creative] worker does not only care about the monetary reward but also about the work's content (or intellectual property) which, even after it has been sold, may still be experienced as in some sense 'owned' – something of which it is possible to be proud.

Understanding meaningful work depends not only on the work itself, but also on the context in which that work takes place (Spencer, 2017). As the platform economy expands and the nature of work is unavoidably reframed, concerns grow over platform jobs eroding the meaningfulness of work that creative freelancers experience (Kalleberg and Dunn, 2016). Characteristics of platform economy work such as the presence of fragmented tasks disconnected from the larger work project, rigid review and rating systems, and having to always be 'online' can be seen as detrimental to the meaningful work construct (De Peuter, 2014; Kenney and Zysman, 2016; Schörfp *et al.*, 2017; Lehdonvirta, 2018). Platform economy workers lack power in their relationships with clients, opening up potential avenues of not only labour abuse and work intensification but also less meaningful work experiences (Fieseler *et al.*, 2019). Yet, the burgeoning literature does not examine what *constitutes* meaning for creative workers in the platform economy, what *detracts* meaning for them in platform employment, and who is more or less likely to *experience* meaningful work in the digital freelancing platforms.

The paper's contributions are twofold. First, it sheds light on work experiences on digital freelancing platforms where a wide variety of different creative tasks and different geographies are considered. This adds to a growing body of empirical literature on digital freelancing by providing evidence on more complex and creative digital work tasks in comparison to microwork. In particular, it provides insights into how freelancers undertaking these tasks perceive meaning in the platform economy work. Second, the paper highlights how the platform economy mechanisms degrade different elements of meaning and why some creative freelancers are able to cope with these mechanism better than others. In doing so, the paper bridges scholarship on digital platforms, meaningful work and entrepreneurship/self-employment to capture the complex nature of creative work practices on digital platforms. Based on the findings, it is argued that a small minority of freelancers remain resilient in the face of platform mechanisms that degrade meaningful work through their entrepreneurial orientation.

The paper proceeds with a section that summarises the background literature on meaningful work in the platform economy. The methodology employed in the study

is then presented, followed by findings and discussions. The conclusions section sums up the findings and highlights the contributions of the study.

## Concepts of meaningful work

In 1963, Frankl wrote that one of the fundamental ways of discovering meaning in life is through creating a work or doing a deed. While a meaningful life can be derived from a variety of activities, many agree that work has a big role to play in it (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009; Duffy *et al.*, 2011). Meaningful work can be characterised to have ‘manifest’ and ‘latent’ meanings (Gill, 1999). The manifest meaning is associated with instrumental or strictly economic rewards, such as pay (‘means to an end’); whereas the latent meaning includes intrinsic rewards of autonomy, creativity, authenticity and external recognition among others. The latent meaning of work is often valued over instrumental rewards (Bailey and Madden, 2016), as it is argued that work performed solely for economic and career advancements is unlikely to provide a deep meaning (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009; Bailey and Madden, 2016).

Latent meaning arising from significant and purposeful work experiences—considered to be a ‘calling’ rather than ‘just a job’—was historically considered sufficient for work to be meaningful as people sacrificed their material well-being in order to serve God or a higher power (Cohen *et al.*, 2019). Indeed, Weber (1930) explains that calling meant responding to God’s call to perform moral and socially valuable work which serves a purpose beyond the ‘self’. After the spiritual connotations greatly fell away over time, the meaning of calling evolved to reflect ‘a highly meaningful career that is used to help others in some fashion’ (Duffy and Dik, 2013: 429) and the meaning at work remained as the source of a person’s lifetime self-identity. More recently, due to flexible market conditions, meaningful work is no longer as closely tied to self-identity, and is instead seen as a crucial aspect of an individual’s life where the norm for meaningful work is flexibility and a drive for constant innovation (Bendassolli and Tateo, 2017).

The empirical literature on meaningful work emphasises that changing factors such as task design and work circumstances affect the meaning that individuals attribute to their work experiences (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009; May *et al.*, 2014; Michaelson *et al.*, 2014). Emergence and growth of the platform economy, along with the changing work relationships on the platforms, introduces important questions around whether and how meaningful work is experienced by a growing share of the creative workforce employed by these platforms. In particular, there are concerns about the erosion of meaning in work for platform economy workers, as discussed in the next section (Drahokoupil and Fabo, 2016).

## Precarity in the platform economy and implications for meaningful work

Issues surrounding employment on the platform economy have been raised recently in the work and employment literature, including concerns about precarious employment (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft, 2013; Tweedie, 2013; Prosser, 2016; Sundararajan, 2016; Webster, 2016). Although precarity has long been a component of work circumstances in the labour market (Morgan *et al.*, 2013)—especially for creative professionals (Florida, 2014)—the growth of the platform economy has intensified this in recent years (Webster, 2016). Digital freelancing platforms present a number of mechanisms that pave the way for potentially less meaningful work experiences for creative freelancers.

Firstly, due to the short-term and the project-based nature of the work relationships in the platform economy, employers (or ‘clients’ as more frequently referred to in these contexts) have less reason to provide meaningful work to their employees. Likewise, platforms act solely as intermediaries, which create a marketplace for clients and freelancers and take a ‘neutral position’, assuming no responsibility to provide meaningful work to freelancers (Barnes *et al.*, 2015; Kenney and Zysman, 2016; Graham *et al.*, 2017b).

Secondly, platforms accommodate highly standardised and commodified work that is often broken into small repetitive tasks not only for microworkers but also for creative professionals (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft, 2014; Graham *et al.*, 2017b; Lehdonvirta, 2018). This alteration of job design, characterised by fragmented task identity (i.e. not being able to complete the full task), repetition (i.e. reduced creativity and reduced variety in the range of capabilities used by the worker), and lowered significance of work (i.e. not seeing the positive impact of one's work on others), can undermine the meaningfulness of work experienced by digital freelancers on the platforms (Fried and Ferris, 1987; Michaelson *et al.*, 2014).

Thirdly, many online freelancing platforms use rating and review systems that allow clients to provide feedback and evaluate the freelancers with whom they work (Horton and Golden, 2015; Pongratz, 2018). These systems provide clients with the means to assess potential freelancers on the basis of their online reputation (Lin *et al.*, 2016; Schörpf *et al.*, 2017) but can be detrimental to meaningful work experiences through limiting autonomy and creativity. Rating and review systems can act as significant entry barriers for new entrants with no or few existing reviews and influence their work experiences negatively from the start. Additionally, freelancers are known to undertake all the actions necessary in order to avoid negative reviews as they face disproportionately unfavourable consequences (i.e. loss of business very quickly; Moreno and Terwiesch, 2014; Lin *et al.*, 2016; Rosenblat *et al.*, 2016; Tadelis, 2016; Borsenberger, 2017; Jin *et al.*, 2017; Wood-Doughty, 2018). In such a setting, rating and review systems act as disciplinary tools to control freelancers' behaviour and work (Schörpf *et al.*, 2017; Wood *et al.*, 2019).

Finally, the increased competition levels on digital platforms can affect freelancers' work experiences negatively due to work intensification. Freelancers from all over the globe greatly outnumber the clients on digital platforms, creating a hypercompetitive environment where freelancers often face having to accept lower remuneration, work on tasks that are not necessarily desirable and work long hours to stay competitive (Barnes *et al.*, 2015; Pongratz, 2018). As a result, the choice and autonomy that freelancers have over the jobs they accept and how much they charge are greatly limited while the outcome of their work is highly dependent on clients' approval. Even though freelancers in digital freelancing platforms do not have a line manager in the traditional sense, they must often conform strictly to their clients' wishes in their work to ensure good ratings, and this reduces flexibility and autonomy in their work (Doody *et al.*, 2016). Fieseler *et al.* (2019) find that digital freelancers perceive their work as highly unfair across different dimensions (i.e. procedural, distributive and interactional fairness). Perceptions of unfairness, along with reduced bargaining power and autonomy, are likely to make it harder for digital freelancers to attain more meaningful work experiences.

While these platform mechanisms are very likely to re-frame work experiences, to date the literature does not explore how the meaningfulness of work is affected. Many recent studies implicitly argue that the manifest meaning of work is eroded in a 'race to the bottom' in platforms (Graham *et al.*, 2017a) but make less explicit postulations about if and how the latent meaning can be found.

### **Entrepreneurship in platform economy and meaningful work**

Although it can be challenging for freelancers to experience meaningful work, digital freelancing platforms arguably provide a suitable work environment to some who are able to live the freelancer's dream of doing what they like, working when and as much as they wish, as well as working on projects they choose (Sapsed *et al.*, 2015). These experiences suggest that there is the potential for meaningful work on platforms, which we discuss next.

The platform economy boosts low-risk 'micro entrepreneurship' that offers an alternative to those previously constrained to traditional employment (Sundararajan, 2014). Indeed, entrepreneurial ideals of self-reliance and flexibility are well diffused among

platform economy workers (De Peuter, 2014; Doody *et al.*, 2016). While enterprising careers are not new to freelancers in traditional/non-digital labour markets (Baines, 1999; Granger *et al.*, 1995; among others within the freelancing literature), recent years have seen an increased uptake of entrepreneurship (sometimes referred to as 'forced entrepreneurship') due to the rise of the platform economy (Scholz, 2016).

Following a long and inconclusive debate on who constitutes an 'entrepreneur'—a *business owner, innovator, risk taker, or self-employed* among other possible descriptors (Begley and Boyd, 1987; Carland *et al.*, 1988; McKenzie *et al.*, 2007)—the entrepreneurship literature often takes the route of focusing on the entrepreneurial disposition or entrepreneurial orientation of the individuals to avoid inconclusive discussions, given the overlaps and fuzzy boundaries between these different definitions (Walter and Heinrichs, 2016). Creativity, a greater need for control, strong desire for independence and autonomy, a greater risk-taking propensity, proactivity and a greater ambiguity tolerance as well as a strong learning orientation are argued to characterise entrepreneurs (Carland *et al.*, 1988; Espiritu-Olmos and Sastre-Castillo, 2015). Even though workers on digital freelancing platforms are typically classified as self-employed and perceived as entrepreneurs in a broad sense, a mixed level of entrepreneurial intentions and inclinations exist among them. Indeed, a large proportion of platform economy workers consider their work as more akin to contract work and freelancing instead of business ownership (Sundararajan, 2014, 2016).

Our perspective is based on an understanding that what distinguishes entrepreneurial individuals from others is a desire or a vision to create a business (Coulson, 2012). Some see themselves 'on ramp' to starting an independent business using the platform; others have already successfully established online businesses. According to Doody *et al.* (2016: 864),

those hoping to maintain their incomes [in the platform economy] need to adopt an enterprising persona, as the capacity of workers to brand and sell themselves in this growing market for non-standard labor is now of utmost importance.

Parallels exist between some of the entrepreneurial characteristics and the foundations of meaningful work, in particular for autonomy. Autonomy, which can be defined as freedom of action (Lumpkin *et al.*, 2009), is prevalent within the context of self-employed entrepreneurs who declare freedom to make decisions and 'control' their destiny as important reasons for choosing self-employment (Douglas and Shepherd, 2002). In the meaningful work literature, autonomy of work and control over one's work choices are also considered to be a crucially important condition for meaningful work experiences (Bowie, 1998). Prior studies reflect that freelancers join digital platforms in search of autonomy and more flexibility over when, where and how to work and the projects and clients with whom they work (Abubakar and Shneikat, 2017; Graham *et al.*, 2017a; Lehdonvirta, 2018; Wood *et al.*, 2019). Nevertheless, the literature paid little attention to the importance of entrepreneurial orientation and desire to build a business for finding meaningful work on platforms.

This paper attempts to address this issue by firstly examining what constitutes 'meaningful work' (Bowie, 1998; May *et al.*, 2014) on digital freelancing platforms, what erodes meaning of work on platforms and whether entrepreneurial orientation can facilitate coping mechanisms to deal with the 'downsides' of platform employment in the pursuit of meaningful work.

## **Data and methodology**

In order to address our research questions, design professionals participating in digital freelancing platforms constituted the empirical focus of this paper. These designers undertake 2D or 3D design that can range from editing a less prominent aspect of a website or image to completing a more complex design project such as web design. Such variety in the tasks undertaken enables the study to explore if and where

meaningful work can be located in these platforms, and to identify the conditions where individuals are able to ascribe more meaning to their work.

This study is grounded in an interpretivist approach. As the study sought to acquire an in-depth understanding of design freelancers' subjective experience and perception of meaningful work on digital freelancing platforms, a qualitative research method using semi-structured interviews was selected (Bryman, 2012; Barnes *et al.*, 2015). The sample comprised freelancers, clients, platform owners and industry experts based in different parts of the world. Inclusion of different groups enabled a more holistic understanding of the freelancer-client working relationships, power dynamics on the platforms and success factors in the platform economy.

The sample was recruited through a combination of purposive sampling and snow-ball sampling; the approach accounted for the context and milieu in which potential participants were active (Kazmer and Xie, 2008). The potential participants among the freelancers were initially contacted via 'Behance', a professional social network for creatives. 'Behance' is a social media platform used to display artwork projects designers have completed in the past. One hundred and sixty-six designers were contacted based on having active 'Behance' profiles (i.e. having posted a recent project within the last 30 days). During the initial contact they were informed about the study and asked if they were offering their services on one or more crowd employment platforms. Freelancers who confirmed that they had offered their services or undertaken work on freelancing platforms were invited to participate in an interview. As the study sought to obtain a range of perspectives in terms of geographical spread and roles (Creswell and Miller, 2000), participants were invited to suggest clients or industry experts who might be interested in participating in the study, and platform owners were contacted directly through their websites. The sample ( $n = 40$ ) comprised 26 freelancers who came from 17 countries around the world, nine clients, two industry experts and three platform owners (see Appendix 1).

To explore different perspectives on meaningful work on digital freelancing platforms, and to identify conditions for individuals to ascribe more meaning to their work, separate interview guides were designed and used for freelancers, clients, industry experts and platform owners. Interview guides for freelancers focused on their general experience on the platforms, satisfaction levels, reasons for participation, expectations from platform employment, ways of working and finding work, and relationships with clients; guides for clients focused on the general experience on the platforms, the types of projects they post on the platforms, the ways they are looking for suitable freelancers and their working relationships with freelancers. Interview guides with platform owners focused on their views of the client-freelancer relationship and the purpose, challenges and advantages of the platforms. Finally, interviews with the industry experts explored the overall dynamics of platform employment and the strategies for successful work relationships on platforms. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Skype and lasted about one hour; they were recorded and transcribed. The data collection took place between June and September 2016, the data was anonymised and the pseudonyms were used to report the findings.

The data were analysed using template analysis, which is a form of thematic analysis that combines a flexible structured process in analysing the data to suit the needs of a particular study (Brooks *et al.*, 2015). First-order codes were developed based on the literature review, and additional codes were developed based on themes arising from the data. Two researchers coded the data to verify the analysis and ensure consistency in approach and interpretation. The data were interpreted iteratively, by reviewing the emerging themes, understanding what the data disclosed about the research questions, and considering the meaning of the data and how this compared with the main patterns and themes.

## Where is the meaning on platforms?

It has been acknowledged that platforms have the potential to create both meaningful (good) and meaningless (bad) jobs (Kalleberg and Dunn, 2016). With this in

mind, we begin by elaborating on the essence of meaningful work for digital freelancers. Then, we explore the platform conditions that can increase precarity and lead to the lack of meaning for freelancers; this is followed by an exploration of the clients' expectations about platforms. Finally, we explain how some freelancers are able to overcome the disadvantages of platform employment through their entrepreneurial orientation.

### **Manifest versus latent meaning—I choose platforms because I want to be free**

To start with, both types of meaning—manifest (i.e. monetary) and latent (i.e. beyond monetary)—were brought up by the interviewees in their reasons for joining the platforms. Some freelancers are mostly interested in monetary rewards for the work; and earnings constitute the only kind of meaning they seek on the platforms ('means to making the ends meet' instead of a 'calling-orientation'; Wrzesniewski, 2003; Visser, 2016). These designers are usually based in developing countries and charge relatively low prices for their services (\$5–\$15 per hour). For them, platforms provide employment opportunities; and they rarely mention concerns regarding any aspects of their work other than pay.

Many freelancing platforms position their social mission around this group of freelancers who often lack employment opportunities elsewhere (e.g. see Samasource <https://www.samasource.org/impact>). One of the platform owners who took part in this study enthusiastically emphasised that their mission was to lift people out of poverty by 'plugging' them into the global labour market, and providing them with opportunities to 'help themselves'. In his opinion, providing monetary meaning to these freelancers made the platform's operations more legitimate and 'meaningful'.

Yet, most freelancers in our sample expressed their desire for 'latent meaning' in their work, beyond monetary meaning. Indeed, some freelancers reported that it is this latent meaning that attracts them to the platforms where they can gain a high degree of personal *autonomy* (i.e. the ability to make their own decisions) and experience *authenticity* (i.e. behaving consistently with one's interests and values) to achieve professional growth (Rosso *et al.*, 2010).

There were some projects I had on [the platform] in which I was trying to work in my bed; the projects were extremely interesting so I dedicated all my time to these projects. And it actually never happens to me in my local projects

(Designer Kareem, Morocco).

Freelancers explained that the freedom of choice and autonomy on the platform allow them to be authentic and true to their values—to be 'real'. Being 'real' was only possible if one worked on the projects they are genuinely interested in and found space for professional growth. Such satisfaction in being 'real' is important for those in search of meaningful work. Several of the clients on the platforms note that they want the freelancers to be 'human', tell their 'own story' through their work, and be intrinsically motivated to work on the projects (Clients Jonathan, Edmond, Peter, Ashley); they want them to be 'excited' (Client Edmond) and 'sincerely interested' (Client Ashley) to produce better-quality work.

Platforms also have the potential to create meaningful work through boosting *creativity* (c.f. Csikszentmihalyi, 2013). One of the platform owners recognised the variety of projects as a clear benefit of the platforms.

It is growing really fast and people love having the choice and variety they get on these platforms... What I hear from designers is that the more work they do, the more creative they get. So, we give them the work that can keep them in the creative zone. The more they produce, the better they produce

(Platform owner David, UK/Global).

Autonomy, authenticity and creativity are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the work to have a latent meaning as the freelancers wish to see their work valued and appreciated by clients. This aspect of meaningful work is associated with *task significance*, which reflects a positive impact of one's work on others (Fried and Ferris, 1987; Rosso *et al.*, 2010). Clients' feedback holds a lot of potential for designers to feel that their work is meaningful and appreciated (Graham *et al.*, 2017a, 2017b; Minter, 2017).

There are so many offers and from so many offers you just... someone picks you and you feel good! So for me [this platform] was mostly psychological; I mean it helped me to regain balance and confidence in my skills

(Designer Diana, Spain/Romania).

Although freelancers can experience autonomy, authenticity, creativity and task significance as a way to achieve meaningful work experiences, most freelancers highlighted that their work is subject to very close control from the clients due to the systems incorporated in the platform structures (Schörpf *et al.*, 2017). This will be explored in the next section.

### **Power of clients and platforms– *I will do anything, just don't rate me badly!***

The majority of the interviewed freelancers expressed an awareness of their increased precarity on the platforms. Power inequality between freelancers and clients, as well as being at the mercy of the platform and the review systems, were argued to intensify the pressures on freelancers and detract meaning from their work. While the emphasis was more on the loss of latent meaning instead of manifest meaning, it was clear that in the freelancers' view the latent meaning cannot be achieved in absence of manifest meaning. It was notable that freelancers that expressed anguish about the loss of meaningful work on platforms were more likely to be from developed economies. They argued that both manifest and latent meaning were quickly disappearing for them on the platforms. They felt that their work is both underappreciated and underpaid.

You just don't feel like you're earning anything because you have spent hours on a big project and, if you don't get much out of it, you just feel very discouraged

(Designer Tomasz, UK/Poland).

Three important reasons that limited freelancers' opportunities to undertake meaningful work came up during the interviews. Firstly, having to respond to proposals promptly—sometimes within minutes—to stand a chance of getting a 'gig'. Having to deliver the jobs very quickly created constant time pressure that restricted creativity. Moreover, it often led to lower-quality work and reduced job satisfaction.

You can get more unique things when you have more time because you kind of – you are more hard on yourself and have more time to work on it. But because [on the platform]... they only pay \$100, I'm not going to spend more than a day or two on a logo... I work very fast in general, but when I worked in the studio I would make a lot, a lot, a lot of drafts and the bosses would like – would be very selective. And now I kind of stand behind what I make but I don't know, if I was in a studio, that they would approve what I do

(Designer Leah, Israel).

Creative workers need time and space to develop innovative ideas that can result in more meaningful work experiences (c.f. Cskikzentmihalyi, 2013). Yet, the abovementioned pressures commonly lead many freelancers on digital platforms to lack both. Their work starts resembling 'digital Taylorism' (Lauder *et al.*, 2008; Holtgrewe, 2014) and is a far cry from achieving one's 'dream job' and self-development (Sapsed *et al.*, 2015).

Secondly, most freelancers felt they had little power in the client-freelancer relationship and that they lacked choice and control over their work. This exacerbated the feelings of being controlled as well as not being able to undertake meaningful work. According to many freelancers, the platforms and their evaluation mechanisms were the source of power inequality. Most freelancers cited the review and rating systems as taking away control, authenticity and creativity. As the rating and review systems replace traditional credibility measures (e.g. qualifications, employment references and personal recommendations), clients' reviews can significantly influence freelancers' future employability and therefore are used as disciplinary tools (Schörpf *et al.*, 2017).

Freelancers reported that the fear of bad reviews often stops them from experimenting and applying for challenging jobs; therefore, restricting their choice, ability to grow and challenge themselves. Most freelancers discussed that the review systems limited their ability to navigate their client relationships freely.

I guess I'm a little scared to work on things that I don't have a lot of experience in because I don't want to get a bad review, because [the platform] works on the review system, so if you have bad reviews and then your work success percentage goes down it's really hard to find new work. So I tend to stay in areas that I know that I have experience in, [so] that I can do a good job

(Designer Leah, Israel).

One freelancer argued that clients used the review systems to 'whip you to work for \$1' and she felt humiliated because she was 'someone who graduated from a top design school' but was forced to work on the platforms and be treated in this way (Designer Nur, Turkey). As a result of her negative interactions with clients on the platform, this freelancer was considering removing herself from the platform and instead create illustrations to put on a website which pays per download of the product, with no interaction with clients. Her reasoning was 'I deserve to be treated more respectfully and, if this is not possible on these platforms, I will find a solution that bypasses clients completely'. Clients acknowledged that review and ratings systems empowered them, as freelancers are ready to do 'anything' (e.g. work for free, refund the payment) in order to receive a five-star review.

I almost feel bad paying them that amount for it but it sounds like they're just willing to do anything just to get a good rating.... That's happened multiple times to me where I'm not happy with something and they'll say if you're not happy with it they would rather refund you your money than to get anything less than a five-star rating

(Client Jonathan).

Third, freelancers felt that the meaning of their work was further reduced due to the platforms' governing rules and reported feeling 'on their own' because platforms side with clients in the case of conflicts.

In nine out of 10 cases, disputes are ruled [in favour of] the client and not for the service provider and all of these biases are inside the policies, so it is really hard to defend your side

(Designer Andrei, Bulgaria).

Moreover, most freelancers expressed concern over their future on the platforms as platforms could 'pull the rug [from] under their feet' (Industry expert Sam) at any time with a decision such as increasing their transaction fees or deciding to change the rules of engagement.

Oh well, there is the issue that they raised the transaction fee from 10 per cent to 20 per cent, which is really a lot.... I had to raise my hourly rate. I tried to explain that I have to pay 20 per cent to [the platform] but it's hard

(Designer Leah, Israel).

This intensely pressurised working environment led many of the freelancers in this study to believe that they were not working in a fair environment where their

work is respected. They felt highly concerned about the processes that detract meaning from their work on the platforms and disempowered them during the interactions with clients. There was a strong feeling that they are not in control of their freelancing careers. Freelancers frequently reported not having enough time and space to grow professionally, produce good-quality work and exercise creativity since the priority was always keeping up with the fast speed on the platform and obtaining new clients as well as ensuring their clients were satisfied enough to give a 'five-star rating'. As a result, they experienced a degradation of latent meaning in their work and the accompanying feelings of sadness, despair and anger towards the systems in place.

### **Differing client expectations on the platform—*Wild Wild West***

In contrast, the majority of clients in our sample felt that platforms were based on a system of fair competition which gave them an opportunity to pay the same amount of money to access much better talent, particularly with people based in developing economies: 'it depends where they live too; somebody in India making \$20 an hour versus somebody in the US making \$20 an hour, it's very different' (Client Samantha). One platform owner summarised his views on globalisation as a macro-trend that creates work and meaning for some, while destroying it for others.

Some designers in the West tell you they are not happy with the designers in India and Indonesia doing the jobs at a fraction of the price they offer. I think that is borderline racist. This is a global economy and everyone participates

(Platform owner David).

Some clients expressed a feeling of disappointment with the quality of labour on the platforms. These clients are interested in high-quality work and ready to pay 'extra' for it in comparison to those who are looking for a 'cheap solution'. This group of clients typically bypass freelancers in search of only manifest meaning (monetary rewards) as they believe such freelancers lack the commitment and interest to become long-term 'business partners' with whom to work on the platforms. They argued that the majority of freelancers on the platforms ('about 80 per cent'—Client Edmond) were not delivering high-quality work and would not qualify as potential business partners. They complained about a lack of correlation between platform ratings and badges of excellence (e.g. 'Top rated', 'Rising star') and the level of work delivered. Therefore, '... there's a ton of search costs associated with finding high-quality people on these platforms and it's the wild wild West' (Client Jonathan). As a result, they develop their own strategies to weed out poor-quality freelancers.

I asked them some very specific graphic design questions. Questions that a graphic designer should be able to answer just straight off the bat.... 'If you were designing a flyer for print, would you use 400 or 500 dpi for your design?' Now, both of those answers are wrong

(Client Edmond).

When prompted to explain what they expect to see in a 'high-quality designer' or a 'business partner', these clients unanimously mentioned a deep interest and engagement in their problem and an intelligent way of providing solutions which add value, not just from a design point of view but in a more holistic business context. They were prepared to pay more for such designers who constitute a small group in our sample. These freelancers tend to be more prepared to sweep aside the potential 'downsides' of the platform economy and find meaning via platform employment. The next section sheds more light into how freelancers in this group are able to create opportunities for meaningful work.

**Entrepreneurial orientation in order to achieve meaningful work—I am here to solve a problem and build a business!**

The findings reveal that designers who are able to cope with the constraints of the platform and experience meaningful work tend to express a strong entrepreneurial orientation. They were praised by clients for being 'high-quality' professionals with 'top business skills' (Client Mert). These freelancers present distinctly different strategies to pursue platform employment. Unlike the majority of the interviewees, who defined themselves as 'freelancers', entrepreneurial freelancers view themselves as 'business owners', or on their way to establishing an independent business.

I have my own brand and I am trying to become a company. I'd like to build an A-Team... A team with A-players. I would like to start building my own apps. I need a developer; I need more people working for me. So that's my plan for the future.... For me it's like a challenge and I like challenges, looking for something new, yes, something different also.

(Designer Juan, Bolivia).

Having an independent business was often seen as the facilitator for maintaining autonomy and control over their work. Being a business owner was also seen as the means to undertaking high-quality creative work that feels more meaningful than any alternative work they could do elsewhere. These freelancers felt that they were in charge of their destiny thanks to the businesses they had set up fully or partially on the platforms. This autonomy facilitated authenticity and task significance they strongly craved to create meaning in work.

I can pick and choose exactly who I want to interact with and I don't have any weaker staff or anything like that; it's pretty much, what I call, sniper mentality, the ability to carve out my own sort of existence in space

(Designer Max, UK).

I think it's when you're working for somebody else, you don't really get the same recognition as when you're self-employed.... So I think it was always in my mind that at one point I would have my own business.... I think you get a different kind of satisfaction when you're finishing a project

(Designer Emma, UK).

The entrepreneurial freelancers in our sample put their focus on the 'business side of things' and on developing and using business skills instead of emphasising their design work. This business focus is distinctly different from other interviewees who are focused on completing tasks with no future plans to start and grow a business.

I need to be aware of the business side of things because, at the end of the day, I'm not an artist, I'm here to solve a problem. I may use creativity. I may use my hands most of the time, and my imagination, but, at the end of the day, I need to help them with their business problem

(Designer Andrei, Bulgaria).

These freelancers aim to offer a deeper level of client engagement. Rather than taking the position of a contractor, they aim to foster a longer-term relationship, showing interest in the client's business and maintaining strong communications throughout. Positioning themselves as a 'creative consultant'—someone who can provide solutions and advice—rather than a designer who executes the work, these individuals aim to engage with the needs of their clients at a more holistic level and, as a result, gain the respect of their clients as well as claiming more room to express their autonomy and lead in the project.

Mainly you have to be like a consultant, not just a designer, because everyone has the designer degree or makes pretty drawings, but when they [clients] try and realise that you are a little bit further than that, you go a little bit further, it's like they realise that they can't own you, you know?... you're going to be different to the other ones that just offer this commodity [design]

(Designer Arnoll, France/Argentina).

I'm not a graphic designer... I don't have any of the tools, so I really need somebody that knows what they're doing... I mean, any time I'm looking for something I always like to say that I want to hire somebody that would be better at it than I would, so I want somebody that's going to also teach me

(Client Samantha).

Entrepreneurial freelancers emphasised the importance of self-enhancement in pursuit of meaningful work, in particular its creative elements. They often expressed the desire to acquire new technical design skills, develop their artistic abilities and become 'better at what they do'. They explained that they keep their knowledge and skills up to date, often using online tutorials and materials instead of more traditional training methods. Updating knowledge and skills is crucial for their ability to 'pivot', which emphasises the ability to smoothly change direction and move into different fields (Crilly, 2018). Pivoting not only helps them better engage with clients and have a more satisfactory business relationship, it also boosts the creative and innovative nature of their work, leading to more meaningful work experiences.

Sometimes it comes with the request from your client as well, so you might have started a project and realised that it is going well and everything is fine, however they want a particular style or they want a particular effect on their design, and sometimes because you don't really want to turn away from it and just say, 'Well, I can't do it', it's up to you then to learn it and decide to go with it, and I guess that's how I learned quite a lot

(Designer Emma, UK).

By continuously enhancing their skills and pivoting as necessary, entrepreneurial freelancers feel confident that their work adds value to clients (task significance). They boldly state that they are much better than competitors/peers and they are not afraid of taking risks. These designers described how they are looking for challenges and push themselves as they believe that this allows them to improve the quality of their work and create new experiences. Undertaking different projects is perceived to provide opportunities to develop skills and to enhance the task significance of what they do.

Finally, entrepreneurial freelancers expressed a strong awareness of the intense competition on the platforms but this was not seen negatively, describing competition as a welcome 'fight'. The metaphor they use to describe themselves is akin to a 'lonely warrior' (Designer Petras, Latvia). For them, the ability to compete and eventually 'win a gig' adds meaning to their work rather than detracting from it.

So it's a competition; you have a whole range of prices there and a whole set of skills and quality. But when you are selected, it's like, 'Oh, yes!!! I beat all these guys!' It's a really good thing

(Designer Juan, Bolivia).

## Conclusions

The paper makes important contributions to the literature on digital platform employment by exploring the concept of meaningful work for creative freelancers. It offers insights on what constitutes meaningful work for designers on digital platforms and which processes detract meaning from their work. Most freelancers that took part in this study were found to be looking for latent meaning in their platform work through autonomy, authenticity, creativity and appreciation from clients. However, many faced degradation of latent meaning due to platform specific factors. They viewed the platform environment as unfair mainly due to the power inequality in freelancer-client relationships and the strict review and rating systems embedded in platforms. While the review and rating systems are intended to reduce information asymmetries by differentiating 'good' clients and freelancers, our findings revealed that they often

detract the meaning of work for freelancers leading to feelings of disempowerment and loss of control over one's career.

The findings reveal that entrepreneurial orientation, that characterises a small group of the freelancers in this study, plays an important role in achieving meaningful work on digital platforms. It enables freelancers to experience *both* latent and manifest meaning. Even though connections between entrepreneurial orientation of the self-employed and their satisfaction with their work exist in the entrepreneurship literature (Binder and Coad, 2013), these connections are new to the platform economy literature. Entrepreneurial freelancers position themselves as 'business owners' on the platform and business ownership is seen as a way to stay in control of their careers. These freelancers offer high levels of engagement to clients and sophisticated solutions to business problems rather than purely executing the given tasks. They continuously invest in their self-development and are not afraid to step out of their comfort zone to take on new challenging projects. They also welcome the highly competitive environment of the platforms and feel that they thrive by differentiating themselves from the rest of the crowd through unique skills.

While entrepreneurial orientation offers a feasible avenue to meaningful work on digital platforms, it should be considered in the context of broader societal and economic dynamics. Recently, a 'glorification' of entrepreneurship is common in media and academic curricula based on the premise of innovation hubs thriving on venture capital investment; and entrepreneurs developing high-growth businesses and becoming young billionaires. Nevertheless, it is often forgotten that this is not a holistic representation of entrepreneurship. In reality, over 50 per cent of entrepreneurial ventures fail within the first four years (Roper and Hart, 2018) and entrepreneurship is associated with high levels of precarity and ambiguity (Nemkova, 2017). Hence, it cannot be imposed on all creative freelancers. In reality the reasons for joining the platforms might be associated with 'push' or 'pull' factors (Kautonen *et al.*, 2010) and affect the strategies freelancers choose to pursue. 'Liberation from career and employment' (Scholz, 2016: 18) on the platforms may be appealing for freelancers who *a priori* have a strong entrepreneurial orientation, but could be equally daunting for many others. Solely relying on entrepreneurial orientation to retain meaningful work on the platforms could be unsustainable proposition as platforms growingly evolve into freelancer versions of capitalism with even more intense competition (crowd-based capitalism; Sundararajan, 2016). Improved platform design, particularly in relation to the review and rating systems and client-freelancer interactions, is crucial to sustain meaningful work as platform jobs increase in number.

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### Notes

1. Other terms used interchangeably with Digital Freelancing Platforms include 'online labour markets' (OLM) and 'crowd-working platforms' (Codagnone *et al.*, 2016; Fieseler *et al.*, 2019).
2. Various alternative names such as collaborative economy, gig economy, on-demand economy, freelance economy and 1,099 economy have been used interchangeably with platform economy in

the literature. This paper uses the term 'platform economy' throughout due to its more common use in the literature and its ability to encapsulate different digitally-enabled elements covered by the alternative terms.

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## Appendix

Table A1: Informant profiles

Reference	Country of current location	Country of origin	Areas of expertise/Role	Earning per hour on the platform	Gender (M/F)
Designer Tomasz	UK	Poland	Graphic design	\$20	M
Designer Sofia	Ukraine	Ukraine	Graphic design	\$20	F
Designer Ahmed	Bosnia	Bosnia	Web design	\$30	M
Designer Andrei	Bulgaria	Bulgaria	Brand identity, logo design	\$38	M
Designer Kareem	Morocco	Morocco	Brand identity, logo design	\$50	M
Designer Emma	UK	UK	Graphic design	\$30	F
Designer Juan	Bolivia	Bolivia	Graphic design	\$22	M
Designer Pat	USA	USA	Graphic design	\$75	M
Designer Max	UK	UK	Graphic design	\$95	M
Designer Mahir	Bangladesh	Bangladesh	Logo design	\$9–15	M
Designer Nimisha	India	India	Graphic design	\$10	F
Designer Alejandra	Venezuela	Venezuela	Illustrator	\$8	F
Designer Leah	Israel	Israel	Logo design	\$40	F
Designer Arnoll	France	Argentina	Brand development	\$55	M
Designer Pranav	India	India	Logo design	\$25	M
Designer Petras	Latvia	Latvia	Product Design	\$25	M
Designer Diana	Spain	Romania	User experience design	\$17.50	F
Designer Mauricio	Colombia	Colombia	Graphic design	\$42	M
Designer Nur	Turkey	Turkey	Illustration/ graphic design	\$20	F
Designer Maria	Portugal	Brazil	Graphic design	\$25	F
Designer Stefan	Serbia	Serbia	Graphic design	\$19	M
Designer Hardik	India	India	User experience design	\$11.11	M
Designer Joseph	UK	UK	Graphic design	\$15	M
Designer Julieta	Argentina	Argentina	Graphic design	\$28	F
Designer Cristian	Romania	Romania	Graphic design	\$8	M
Designer Saba	Bangladesh	Bangladesh	Print design	\$20	F
Client Jonathan	UK	USA	Coaching and brand identity consultant	N/A	M
Client Edmond	Australia	Australia	Church director	N/A	M

(Continued)

**TABLE A1: Continued**

Reference	Country of current location	Country of origin	Areas of expertise/Role	Earning per hour on the platform	Gender (M/F)
Client Lucas	UK	UK	Training company director	N/A	M
Client Peter	Germany	Germany	Software developer	N/A	M
Client Mert	Turkey	Turkey	Fast growth start-up	N/A	M
Client Samantha	USA	USA	Marketing agency	N/A	F
Client Ashley	USA	Peru	Financial consultant self-employed	N/A	F
Client Jim	UK	UK	Publishing company	N/A	M
Client Phil	UK	UK	Technology-based company	N/A	M
Platform owner Serkan	Turkey	Turkey	Freelancing	N/A	M
Platform owner David	UK	UK	Freelancing	N/A	M
Platform owner Dan	UK	UK	Platform developer	N/A	M
Expert Sam	UK	UK	Career advisor for platforms	N/A	M
Expert Jen	UK	Australia	Self-employment career advisor	N/A	F