Article – Open section

The entanglement of emotional labour and digital work platforms
A study of how professional gamers, influencers, and gig and crowd workers experience the affordances of digital work platforms

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Abstract

Today, work is increasingly performed on or through various digital platforms. This article aims to study workers at the forefront of digital labour. Drawing on 29 qualitative interviews with professional gamers, influencers, and platform workers, this study explores how digital platform affordances across diverse types of platform-mediated work shape the performance of emotional labour. The article's main contribution is showing how workers experience the affordances of the platforms and, further, how the affordances of the platforms demand the performance of extensive emotional labour from the workers. This article shows how two high-level affordances mainly contribute to this: the capacity to transcend physical space and the immediacy and multiplicity of the digital distribution of information and data.

Keywords
Emotional labour, platformisation, gig economy, influencers, harassment

Introduction

Caja live streams Counter-Strike on Twitch, a platform for streaming content, mostly live gaming. Most of Caja's followers are male, and Caja is fully aware that for many of her followers, Caja's flirting and performance of availability are crucial; therefore, she kept her partner secret until recently:

> Caja: "It went on for a year, and we then revealed it. [...] Some of my followers became grumpy. It did change something... also about money, as awful as it sounds".
> Interviewer: "Did you earn less?"
> Caja: "Yes; in some periods, yes".

When asked, Caja awkwardly laughs and says the secrecy on Twitch "was strange". This pinpoints the nature of her labour: the strangeness of pretending, potentially compromising her integrity and commodifying herself as something she is not. Ultimately, this potentially damages relationships with followers and their partners.

In this study, we examine the emotional labour performed by platform workers and how it is entangled with the various affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) of digital work platforms. This study contributes insights into the interplay between the platform workers using the platform and the affordances of the platform. We identify two high-level affordances: the capacity to transcend physical space and the immediacy and multiplicity of the digital distribution of information and data, which are crucial to the platform workers' working conditions. Through individual platform workers' narratives, it is possible to gain insight into the experiences of the entanglement of platforms and emotional labour. According to Hochschild (1983/2012), emotional labour is performed when workers are "being hired and monitored for [their] capacity to manage and produce a feeling" (Hochschild, as cited in Beck, 2018, p. 1). Through her study of service work performed in the traditional labour market, Hochschild famously established that workers in the capitalist economy are subjected to commodification of their feelings. Hochschild argues that employees are increasingly required to perform emotional labour as services become an increasingly important part of products sold in capitalist markets (Hochschild, 1983/2012).

We study two forms of platform-mediated work: 1) work on various social media platforms that include young influencers and gamers who work as self-employed and whose primary occupation is to produce content for their social media profiles on platforms such as Instagram, Twitch, and YouTube, often by commodifying their private spheres and everyday lives (Abidin, 2015, 2016, 2018; Nielsen & Nielsen, 2024); and 2) work on or through digital work platforms. Work on or via digital work platforms includes young people performing tasks provided through digital platforms, also known as *crowd* and *gig work* (Heiland, 2021). *The platform economy*, or *gig economy*, evolves around on-demand digital platforms that generate value as facilitators or mediators of supply and demand

for services and tasks (Bergvall-Kåreborn & Howcroft, 2014; Franke & Pulignano, 2021; Shapiro, 2018).

We realise that these two types of workers perform in radically different digital markets and that juxtaposing them may seem odd. Platform workers are commonly considered a continuation of the traditional precariat (Standing, 2011). They are often considered exposed and exploited (Bergvall-Kåreborn & Howcroft, 2014; De Stefano, 2016; Gerber, 2022; Nielsen et al., 2022). While influencers and gamers are also affected by the dynamics of precarisation, they also operate within celebrity ecology (Abidin, 2018; Marwick, 2015) and engage in much more prestigious labour. Our ambition in this study is not to identify the dissimilarities between these two types of professions. Instead, these two types of platform-mediated work are combined to explore emotional labour across different digital platforms. Thus, our ambition is to explore how the affordances of digital platforms are entangled with the performance of *emotional labour*. Poell et al. (2019) described the current state of the world as being deeply entangled with digital platforms. They define *platformisation* as "the penetration of the infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks of platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life" (p. 7). All aspects of our lives, "including journalism, transportation, entertainment, education, finance, and health care" (Poell et al., 2019, p. 1), are transformed by digital platforms.

This article contributes to the ongoing discourse on platform-mediated work in media studies. Its primary contribution lies in its meticulous empirical analysis of the various manifestations of emotional labour within platform-mediated work across diverse digital platforms. While previous studies tend to focus on the performance of emotional labour with a single digital platform, this study adopts a broader perspective on platform-mediated work. Consequently, the study encompasses work conducted on and through online digital work platforms, location-based digital work platforms, and social media platforms. In this study, we pose the following questions: *How is the performance of emotional labour entangled with the affordances of digital work platforms? What implications does this entanglement have for the working lives of individual platform workers?*

We will address this question by outlining the article's central concept, emotional labour, and examining its utilisation in previous studies on platform-mediated work. We then delve into our empirical data, focusing on the code "emotion", and structure our analysis around core platform affordances. Our analysis is based on 29 interviews with platform workers. This approach enables us to explore the texture of emotional labour within the digital labour market. This study sheds light on how emotional demands evolve across various digital relationships involving the platform, its workers, and its customers or followers.

Referring to the concept of "affordances" allows us to analyse the constitution of the digital platform and the relationship between the technology and the users. In short, affordance offers insight into the mode of engagement that digital platforms encourage

their users to engage in (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). The concept has been conceptualised and operationalised across various disciplinary boundaries. It was initially developed in ecological psychology and later adopted in design studies (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). There are two levels of understanding affordances: 1) low-level affordances, which cover concrete media elements that invite the user to interact with the media interface, such as a like button; and 2) high-level affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Hopkins, 2020), which cover more abstract dynamics and the conditions that digital platforms enable. This study examines how digital platforms' high-level affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) shape emotional labour among platform-based workers.

Emotional labour

In her seminal work, *The Managed Heart* (1983/2012), Arlie Hochschild pioneered the concept of emotional labour, shedding light on a previously overlooked aspect of labour. Hochschild defines emotional labour as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labour is sold for a wage" (Hochschild, 1983/2012, p. 29). This entails employees being tasked with regulating customer emotions to enhance the market value of their services or products. Thus, predominantly women, flight attendants, debt collectors, and numerous other service providers must draw upon their personal resources, often compromising their sense of self. Hochschild's work brings visibility to a form of labour typically invisible, undervalued, and predominantly carried out by women (Hochschild, 1983/2012). In executing emotional labour to make customers feel special, appreciated, or even loved, employees engage in a service provision that entails cultivating and expressing particular emotions on their behalf. This task demands not only the regulation of customers' emotions but also the suppression of any conflicting emotions that service workers may experience. Additionally, Hochschild employs the terms "emotion work" or "emotion management" to describe similar acts performed in private contexts (Hochschild, 1983/2012, p. 29), but in this study, we only focus on professional contexts.

Other studies in the realm of platform-mediated labour (Wang & Tomassetti, 2024) have applied the notion of affective labour, as proposed by Hardt (1999) and elaborated upon by Hardt and Negri in their works *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2004). While Hochschild's framework primarily delves into the interactions between workers and customers or clients within the service industry, highlighting the emotional demands imposed on individuals in such roles, Hardt and Negri's conception of affective labour extends beyond the traditional workplaces to encompass a broader spectrum of activities and social relations. Affective labour, as articulated by Hardt and Negri, involves the production and management of affects or emotions that contribute to social and economic value creation across various spheres of life, transcending the boundaries of formal employment. While affective labour often entails fascinating critical perspectives on capitalism, Hoch-

schild's concept offers a more precise examination of the relationship between workers and customers/consumers/clients within specific industries. While both concepts address the influence of emotions in labour processes, Hochschild's emotional labour tends to focus narrowly on workplace dynamics within service-oriented sectors. In contrast, Hardt's conception of affective labour offers a broader perspective that encompasses a wider array of social and economic activities.

Emotional labour in platform-mediated work

An emerging body of literature engages with the emotional labour performed by gig workers (e.g., Kaine & Josserand, 2019). Gandini (2019) was among the first to explore the social relations between workers and their clients/customers within platform-mediated work and the emotional labour required. Gandini argues that despite variations between platforms concerning the nature of the work and the context of where it is performed, "platforms represent the place where social relations between a worker and a client or consumer become relations of production" (Gandini, 2019, p. 1046). Studies have explored emotional labour within different forms of platform-mediated work (Chen, 2018; Gandini, 2019; Heiland, 2021; Moore, 2018; Prassl, 2018; Raval & Dourish, 2016). Prassl (2018) describes emotional labour in on-demand work performed offline with clients as "emotionally downright brutal work – which must nonetheless be performed in a prompt, friendly, and cheerful manner to avoid low ratings" (Prassl, 2018, p. 7). Along with others, Prassl argues that asymmetrical employment relationships in the platform economy are crucial for platform workers' social and economic vulnerability and performance (Chen, 2018; Franke & Pulignano, 2021; Moore, 2018; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Shapiro, 2018). The asymmetrical relations may pressure platform workers to meet customers' requirements or needs (Franke & Pulignano, 2021; Moore, 2018; Ravenelle, 2019) and perform cheerfully in their digital relations (Prassl, 2018). The idea that emotions must be managed as part of a service experience is not new; however, in platform-mediated work, the platform features of evaluation, ratings, and algorithmic logic determine the platform worker's potential income (Lee et al., 2015; Raval & Dourish, 2016; Möhlmann & Zalmanson, 2017; Gandini, 2019; Jarrahi & Sutherland, 2019). Customer ratings are typically displayed on the individual platform worker's profile, making them a visible selling point or disadvantage (Gandini, 2019). The ratings are also processed by the platform's search algorithms, which rank workers in the search results (Lee et al., 2015; Möhlmann & Zalmanson, 2017; Jarrahi & Sutherland, 2019). Thus, positive ratings and evaluations are crucial when working on or through digital work platforms, and studies have shown how rating systems "disciplines and motivates workers towards certain behaviours" (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016, p. 3772). Maintaining a good vibe with the customer to secure a good rating is emotional labour.

While prevailing research on platform-mediated work predominantly resides within the labour market and working life research, the study of content creators (influencers and gamers) spans diverse fields such as media, cultural, celebrity, and strategic com-

munication studies. However, our approach draws inspiration from studies that explicitly focus on content creators' practices as work. Although Hochschild's concept of emotional labour (1983/2012) is at the core of our research ambition, we acknowledge that the study of emotional labour performed by content creators is deeply entangled with notions of attention economy (Goldhaber, 1997), authenticity, and personal branding.

The dynamics between creators and their audiences have been a focal point in the existing literature on content creators and emotional labour. While platforms such as Twitch are ostensibly dedicated to gaming content, interpersonal interactions between streamers and viewers often overshadow gameplay. Recent research on Twitch and You-Tube highlights this paradigm shift (Anderson, 2017; Johnson & Woodcock, 2019a, 2019b; Minseong & Hyung-Min, 2022; Woodcock & Johnson, 2019; Zhang & Wu, 2022). Questions, jokes, and discussions take precedence, illuminating the evolving nature of content creation and the emotional investment demanded. Studies have confirmed that while viewers may not acknowledge the performative nature of streaming, "a striking amount of affective labour goes into a stream" (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019, p. 820). This observation extends to various aspects, including studies of humour performed by streamers (Johnson, 2019), authenticity (Cunningham & Craig, 2017), and swearing (Fägersten, 2017). In the context of female streamers, emotional labour is frequently translated into care-giving (Ruberg & Cullen, 2019), shedding light on how gendered demands and notions shape the practices of female streamers.

Some (early) influencer studies have examined the relationship between influencers/celebrities/bloggers and their followers as a communication effort. Influencer researcher Crystal Abidin (2015) coins the term "'perceived interconnectedness', in which influencers interact with followers to give the impression of intimacy" (para. 2). Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2011) are interested in (micro-)celebrity practices on Twitter and emphasise that celebrity is a performance rather than inherent traits. Neither of these studies considers the emotional labour of influencers/celebrities but mainly engages with this as a *strategic* effort. However, more recent studies have been directly inspired by Hochschild's emotional labour. These recent studies argue for a more combined approach to the influencer's effort, characterising it as emotional labour and a strategic effort to succeed in the attention economy. Several of them combine emotional labour with other themes such as intimacy (Abidin & Thompson, 2012; Abidin, 2015; Raun, 2018), authenticity (Duffy & Hund, 2019; Marwick, 2013, 2019; Nielsen & Nielsen, 2024), and anxiety (Bishop, 2018; Lehto, 2022).

Finally, studies on influencers and streamers share a common challenge: the inability to monetise until a substantial following is established. Brooke Erin Duffy (2016) introduces the concept of aspirational labour. This type of work is performed with hope and expectations of the future, albeit not guaranteed, success. Duffy's work highlights a strand of research engaging with the worry and distress content creators might feel in precarious work situations. While this is not directly related to Hochschild's conceptualisation

of emotional labour, this is an important strand of research highlighting the emotional distress content creators might feel. In tandem with this, Johnson and Woodcock (2019a) expound on "neoliberal subjectivity", where success is perceived as a direct outcome of relentless effort, mainly quantified by the number of hours streamed weekly. This perspective places a significant "emotional toll" (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019, p. 820) on content creators.

Method

Data collection

This study builds on 29 qualitative interviews with young Nordic workers aged between 18 and 30 with platform-mediated work. When recruiting interviewees, we were conscious of recruiting workers who could give us insight into how digital mediation shapes emotional labour. Therefore, we recruited workers connected to platforms with different forms of digital mediation: online, location-based, and social media platforms. We are also aware of recruiting workers associated with platforms with different forms of digital information distribution. We collected data from two research projects from 2016-2019. We had to use many different strategies to gain access to the interviewees we wanted to interview. Gig and crowd workers were recruited through open invitations to participate in the project via the platform's newsletters and Facebook groups; however, these were unsuccessful. Therefore, we chose to contact them via various other channels: directly through their profile on the digital platforms, via their contact information on the platform, via Facebook groups, via the researchers' stakeholder network, or contact if we saw them on the street with a logo or company equipment indicating affiliation with a platform. Fourteen of the 35 workers agreed to participate in the study. Workers on social media platforms were recruited using their own publicly available online contact information, through contact with influencer agencies, or through researchers' networks. Fifteen of the 22 workers on social media platforms agreed to participate in the study.

   We developed an interview guide to ask open and exploratory questions (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2005; Staunæs & Søndergaard, 2005). Interviews of 1-1.5 hours were conducted at a time and place convenient for the worker. The workers were asked about the differences between online and offline relationships at work. We also asked about their experiences concerning temporality in platform-mediated work. Their answers allowed us to answer questions of how the capacity of digital platforms to transcend physical space is entangled with emotional labour and how the immediacy and multiplicity of the digital distribution of information and data are entangled with emotional labour. We specifically asked workers what was required for them to perform a good job. This question often led to responses that addressed the emotional demands of platform-mediated work. The quotes used in this article were translated from Danish, and the names and personal iden-

Type of platform	Men	Women
Online digital platforms (crowd work): (WorkSome, Din tekstforfatter, Freelancer)	4	2
Location-based digital platforms (gig work): (Wolt, HandyHand, Chabber, Care, Dogley, Hilfr)	5	3
Social media platforms: (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, personal blogs)	6	5
Live streaming platforms: (Twitch)	3	1
Total	18	11

Table 1: Overview of the 29 interviews by type of digital platform and gender.

tifiers of the participants were altered to ensure their privacy. All participants' personal information was handled following GDPR.

Analytical approach: Platform-mediated work, affordances, and emotional labour
While we do not claim to perform a complete analysis of all dimensions of labour performed by the informants, we do agree with Poell et al. that "data infrastructures, markets, and governance – need to be studied in correspondence with shifting cultural practices" (2019, p. 2). This article attempts precisely this but has a limited scope: We interviewed young workers about their platform-mediated work and analysed *their experiences*. While we have not explicitly enquired about our informants' experience of the platform's data infrastructures, the platformed "market", and platform "governance", these are touched upon in the interviews (among other things) when we enquired into the informants' general experience of their work. All interviews were transcribed and thematically coded (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in NVivo 12. The analytic code "emotion" was selected for a closer enquiry in this study.

The concept of affordance allows us to understand and analyse platform interfaces and the relationship between technology and users (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). By turning towards affordances, we expect to gain insights into how the platform infrastructure becomes a co-creator of the work environment of platform workers and how the platforms increasingly put pressure on platform workers to perform emotional labour. We will not go into detail with feature-oriented low-level affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 7) of likes and share buttons. Instead, the analysis is organised around two high-level affordances that stood out: 1) the capacity of digital media to transcend physical space, and 2) the immediacy and multiplicity of the digital distribution of information and data. We analyse how the two affordances are entangled with the performance of emotional labour. The two affordances were chosen in dialogue with the interviews conducted due to their tentatively significant impact on the experiences of platform workers. Moreover, these affordances resonate with existing studies that emphasise how

the transcending of physical boundaries (e.g., Gregg, 2011) and the immediacy of digital communication (e.g., Orr et al., 2023, p. 211) amplify the pressures on workers to engage in continuous and intensive emotional labour.

Analysis

The analysis is organised around four themes prevalent in the interview data. The first two correspond with the two high-level affordances, and the next two are themes most prevalent when exploring the intersection of platform affordances and emotional labour: 1) immediacy and multiplicity create demands for emotional labour; 2) physical distance creates a demand for emotional labour; 3) negotiating boundaries as emotional labour; and 4) harassing behaviour. The quotes presented in the analysis were selected because they represented a fruitful articulation of the encounter of digital platform affordances and the shaping of harassing and abusive relations among customers and workers. The quotes were also selected to represent the variation in digital work platforms. The logic behind the selection and scope of quotes is described by Hennink et al. (2017) as "meaning saturation". In the following analysis, we have thus included as many quotes as required to support and "saturate" that these high-level affordances can be understood as important features in the co-production of demands for emotional labour.

Immediacy and multiplicity create demands for emotional labour

Caja, introduced at the beginning of this article, is a 21-year-old gamer. She live streams Counter-Strike gameplay on Twitch. Her followers subscribe to her channel on Twitch, watch her gameplay, and chat with her while she plays. She games out of her private home on her computer, and her followers are primarily Danish males. In the following quote, she describes that while she is busy gaming, her followers can comment through a chat function that she must simultaneously answer:

> It's really difficult, it takes some practice… Especially in Counter-Strike, where you con-
> stantly have to look at the map to see where the other players are, and "do I have to throw
> a smoke [smoke grenade] or should I throw a nade [grenade]?" And then, "well, ok, he
> [follower] also wrote this". Then I have to chat. And then, "Oops, I died" [...] However, I have
> focused on making my followers feel good. I think this is what I am like as a person. I do not
> want them to feel they do not mean anything to me because I care about what they say.

Chatting with followers is something Caja highly values. She considers the emotional labour she performs to be the most important dimension of her work. Additionally, she believes that this effort motivates her followers. She exhibits awareness of her status as a commodity, in which she must distinguish herself in a market in competition with many others, primarily male gamers who offer live streaming. While many male gamers stand out through the exhibition of loud or humorous personalities (Fägersten, 2017), Caja

specialises in care, intimacy, and friendship. This is in line with the findings of previous studies on gameplay streaming. Female gamers tend to pay much more attention to the emotional needs of their followers (Uszkoreit, 2018), use emotions as a strategic tool for self-branding, and set the tone in their community (Ruberg & Cullen, 2019). This quote also provides insight into how this dual focus on emotional labour and gameplay is challenging to manage and has negative consequences, especially for the gameplay itself, contributing to the perception of female gamers as poor gamers. Thus, platform affordances contribute to Caja's demanding working conditions. The split screen allows the game to be played while simultaneously demanding Caja's attention to the chat, thus creating a highly demanding work environment where she must play a complex computer game while exhibiting care and sincerity towards her followers. However, Caja tells us that this part of her work comes "naturally" and gives her a feeling of "meaningfulness". Occasionally, she feels guilty when she believes she has not paid sufficient attention. However, the emotional aspect of Caja's work is also the most demanding.

This is also the case for 23-year-old Rasmus. Since his college graduation, Rasmus has earned a living within the world of esports. For several years, he played professionally for a Counter-Strike team, but now he earns income as a live streamer on Twitch, where he streams gameplay while commenting. Rasmus displays ads on his stream, and his followers can pay a monthly subscription fee to his channel and access exclusive content. Similar to Caja, Rasmus explains that his role requires him to be entertaining while also paying attention to his followers:

> You are so close to your idol. That makes esports and streaming unique: Anyone can come in [while he is live streaming] and get a "hello" from me. I can recognise them. I notice them and know who they [the viewers] are.

Like Caja, Rasmus finds the emotional part of the work to be the most demanding. He performs what Fägersten (2017) described as a loud or humorous personality. Being loud and humorous is demanding when, on bad days, he is forced to manage his own emotions to perform the energetic gamer role that his followers expect:

> It takes a lot of me. You can have a bad day, but that will not work [on the stream]. Bad days aren't a possibility. You have to stay alert. You must smile and be happy, and if not happy, then at least energetic, to be entertaining. And that is super hard. Well, it's like that… mentally, I always feel like I am totally and completely busted after four or five hours on the stream, where you sit and talk all the time without any breaks. After that, you will be completely exhausted. As soon as I sit silently for a minute, people sit and think, "What happened? Why doesn't he say anything? It is boring; I will leave". So, you stay alert.

The live streams on Twitch can go on for days (Johnson, 2021), but streaming for just four to five hours is also exhausting. Rasmus describes elsewhere that Twitch allows him to closely monitor the ebb and flow of viewers and the real-time feedback loop of his view-

ers. These movements directly affect his ability to make profits. While Rasmus monitors his viewer count, the platform incentivises him to perform emotional labour and entertainment, thus leaving him exhausted. In both cases, immediacy is a crucial high-level affordance (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019a) according to the emotional labour required by both workers. They constantly monitor the reactions of followers and their metrics. In addition, they must simultaneously perform emotional labour in multiple digital spaces.

Gamers on Twitch are particularly challenged by the *multiplicity* of digital media. Rasmus and Caja describe the stress of simultaneously monitoring multiple elements: performing emotional labour while playing the game and using the chat function. Rasmus describes how the immediacy of digital media creates a hyperawareness of his value as an entertainment commodity. Nonetheless, providing entertainment, pleasure, and well-being is a central part of the task for all the workers in our study. This calls for various types of micromanagement of their emotions to nurture and care for customers in the gig economy. In some cases, customers seem to expect more intimacy than workers find appropriate, and boundaries must be managed and policed by workers. When a worker does not meet such expectations and denies the customer or follower access to their private sphere, it risks the relationship and followers' experiences. Thus, the worker risks losing income.

Physical distance creates a demand for emotional labour

Vera, 25, finds work distributed by a digital labour platform called Worksome. Vera takes up highly skilled work as a digital marketing consultant. Some of her gigs are short-term and can be completed from her home. Others are long-term projects, where Vera works from clients' offices for up to three months. The customer finds Vera through her profile on the digital platform. The pay and working conditions are negotiated with customers from one gig to the next. In the following quote, Vera discusses working online as the newest member of an international project team:

> The team members are based in different cities. When you are on an international team, it is natural for you to communicate differently when digital. You try to choose your words carefully and have a "nice tone of voice". You think more than once when it is a digital team. Everybody knows that it requires extra effort to collaborate. If you haven't met in real life, it seems odd to make demands without first being polite, like "How was your weekend?" you know, and a little emoji.

Digital workflow platforms allow Vera and her team to collaborate over large distances. This means that the daily social interactions of an office are absent; thus, Vera finds it necessary to perform more emotional labour. She is aware that written communication can easily be misunderstood. Therefore, she communicates extraordinarily politely with the team to make them comfortable. For Vera, who primarily works short contracts, her mode of communication becomes a way of ensuring a willingness to work and a

willingness to please, thus maintaining her reputation as someone easy to work with and making herself attractive to future clients. However, this comes at a cost. Studies on digital workflow platforms confirm that the use of platforms places increased demands on workers to perform emotional labour, relate to colleagues informally, and increase unclarity about social rules (Pultz & Dupret, 2023). In Vera's case, it becomes evident that being in the margins of the workplace (both physically and organisationally), the digital workflow demands that she works even harder. Vera's short-term gig and her demanding manager in a high-performance work culture drain her:

> I think it's really, really difficult to find the balance between how much you have to please and how much you have to stand on your own two feet. In a way, I have been training that muscle almost daily for three months. Now, I have to recharge because I have been so worn out… Emotionally worn out.

Vera's way of balancing how much to please coworkers can be viewed as emotional labour that comes with an emotional cost. She finds herself so emotionally exhausted that she has to "recharge" after a work period.

Sine, a 29-year-old influencer and business owner, also performs emotional labour as part of her work as an influencer. Most of Sine's work consists of being present on social media platforms. Her social media outlets focus on health and fitness. She has 34,000 followers on Instagram. Being visible and keeping followers updated are crucial to her success. Sine occasionally engages in paid partnerships on Instagram and shares commercial content. Sometimes, Sine arranges for the followers to get together:

> In the Facebook groups I created, we have also been dining together… There might have been 30-40 girls at 3-5 events. And I have also had a big open birthday party for free, and 200 joined… It was just something I did because it meant something to me. I think… I am loyal to them [followers]. I think my followers feel that they mean a lot to me. I can feel them, too. So, it's like a relationship of love, I think, I would call it [laughs].

Sine's engagement with her followers transcends the digital and spills into "real life". Her intimate relationship with them manifests itself through meetings beyond the digital domain and becomes a testimony to her loyalty and even love. Further, the emotional labour on display seems to transgress another dichotomy: private and working life. Sine even invites her followers to her birthday party and dinners, thus enabling them to meet.

Angela McRobbie (2016) argues that the promise of pleasure in creative work comes with a cost: requirements of extra emotional labour, often not perceived as work but as mutual joy. Interpersonal relations in digital work require workers to create trust between themselves and their followers, which is particularly necessary in the digital labour market. Relationships in digital work transcend the online-offline divide. Sine goes to great lengths to overcome physical distance and bring her followers together. Vera, Rasmus, and Caja met the distance challenge through extra emotional effort. While Caja and Rasmus play

Counter-Strike and chat with their followers, Sine updates her followers on everyday life and how she stays healthy, but the crucial by-product of their primary labour is friendship or bonding with their followers. All three workers are examples of how they perform emotional labour in the digital labour market as a capitalist transaction where emotions become an increasingly significant commodity.

Negotiating boundaries as emotional labour

23-year-old Karen finds offline work as a babysitter on the American work platform Care. Karen's customers, parents who need babysitting services, find Karen through her profile on the platform, or Karen herself contacts parents who have shared babysitter gigs. Initially, Karen arranged to meet parents and children in their homes. Karen is not paid for the encounter, but she perceives this meeting as crucial for her to be comfortable with the customer. She says: "This [meeting] worries me. Will the family be who they say they are? [I worry about] showing up at the home of men who have learned that it is an easy way to meet young girls". Karen reflects on the risks of securing a gig online and performing it offline; she cannot know who she is meeting and whether they pose a risk, especially as a young woman. In line with existing research (James, 2022; Sedacca, 2022), domestic workers in the gig economy are usually never protected when it comes to occupational health and safety. Instead, Karen must manage the heightened alertness and anxiety that come with her work. Hochschild (1979, 1983/2012) conceptualises this as emotional work: Emotional efforts are conducted to manage feelings in a particular (work) setting. Karen performs emotional labour; thus, the only "digital dimension" to her work is that the contact between her and her customers is facilitated through a labour platform. Karen says that most of the customers do not address her as a professional but more as a personal contact:

> I reject it if somebody [parents] requests friendships on Facebook or Snapchat. They should not be able to follow my life. I want the professional and the private to be kept apart. […] Sometimes, parents especially need to share something. Some mothers look at me as some kind of girlfriend. More than a babysitter. If that is how they feel, then that's fine with me. However, I see them as people with whom I work. I try to separate it.

In this example, direct offline contact with parents makes it difficult for Karen to reject their emotional invitations to "share" their experiences and emotions. It seems easier for her to reject requests for online friendships. Previous studies have shown that digital platforms reinforce the emergence of *boundaryless work* (Gregg, 2011). This means that work can permeate the private sphere (Wood et al., 2018), and the boundaries between the private and professional spheres are destabilised and renegotiated (Gregg, 2011), as in the case of Karen. This example highlights Karen's attempt to maintain a traditional work-life balance, establishing clear boundaries between her professional life and personal time. However, it also emphasises the challenges posed by the affordances of digital plat-

forms that blur these boundaries. Consequently, both parents and Karen (may) experience feelings of insecurity. For parents, maintaining a connection with Karen via Facebook might foster a sense of reassurance when leaving their child in her care. Conversely, Karen perceives parents' digital outreach as intrusive and crossing personal boundaries.

Parallel to this, Caja, who live streams Counter-Strike gameplay on Twitch, must also negotiate the boundaries between her private and public life. As described in the introduction, most of Caja's followers are male, and subtle flirtation is expected between her and them:

> It was strange, but it worked. [laughs] [...] I think that many of the followers kind of fancy you. For many followers, a girl playing computer games is appealing. [...] You know, many of the followers try to flirt, and in a way, I also did it a bit because they liked it.

Therefore, Caja and her boyfriend kept their relationship secret. In the quote presented in the introduction, Caja recounts how the revelation of her relationship had negative consequences for her income. Disclosure of her relationship interrupted the illusion of Caja's availability. She described it as awful that she had lost commodity value. On the other hand, she knows that the category "available" must also be carefully balanced because of the risk of being perceived as a camgirl. Caja seems to be very experienced in performing this kind of emotional labour. In the following quote, she tells us how she is constantly being policed as a woman in gaming:

> If I sat down once on a stream dressed in a low-cut shirt, it could change everything. This could change how people look at me. There are many camgirls on Twitch. So if I do that once, then she is a camgirl.

Female gamers often feel required to constantly perform boundary work to ensure that their followers and peers do not identify them as "camgirls" or "titty streamers" (Ruberg et al., 2019). Caja performs this boundary work by managing her outfits and distancing herself from the so-called camgirl. For Caja, the camgirl represents a female gamer who uses her femininity ("dressed in a low-cut shirt") for attention and profit. Therefore, Caja must constantly avoid being categorised as a camgirl.

Harassing behaviour

For Sine, the influencer being exposed to the public is at the heart of her practice as an influencer. When asked if the exposure had led to any uncomfortable experiences, she replied:

> I think it depends on what makes you feel uncomfortable. For example, some take offence or become angry if they receive dick pics or nudes on their social media. However, as long as they stay on my phone, I can delete and block them. [...] I'm not that offended.

Harassment such as this is common among influencers (Pillai & Ghosh, 2022; Valenzuela-García et al., 2023). Surprisingly, Sine does not articulate these transgressive behaviours as an emotional burden. She is unsentimental about it; the messages constitute only a practical problem for her. The ability of social media platforms to facilitate relations across distances also leads to the transgressive and abusive behaviour of male followers. The platform's affordance of direct and instant messaging allows her followers to penetrate her private sphere. Dick pics from male followers on her phone are crossing the border of what is acceptable for Sine. Working off a digital platform and Instagram, Sine does not control who follows her content, and she has followers who follow her for reasons other than her core audience. Several studies (Abidin, 2019; Pillai & Ghosh, 2022; Valenzuela-García et al., 2023; Duffy et al., 2022) mention the common perception that influencers are either privileged or lucky even to be able to make a living from producing content and that harassment "comes with the job". These ideas were undercurrent in many of our interviews with influencers and gamers. Considering one of Sine's ways of creating a connection with her target group, meeting up in offline spaces, she seems to have connections that she might consider more "real" than the exclusively online trolls. These offline interactions potentially provide her with a support network that shields her from the negative impact of online harassment, allowing her to navigate the gaming community with greater resilience and agency.

The gamer Caja talks about an encounter with a subscriber during a visit to a café with her mother. She perceives this situation as extraordinarily embarrassing and almost shameful. The subscriber approaches her and introduces himself as a subscriber:

> In a way, it really… overstepped my boundaries. He has always been the nicest, but to see him – and my mother. She knew about my work, but she could see that I was embarrassed. He had done so much for me and had donated the most money.

After Caja has done much work to be perceived by followers and colleagues as a respectful gamer, she unexpectedly encounters the follower who has donated the most money and gives her a conspicuous amount of attention in a café. She still does not know if the meeting was, in fact, a coincidence. Caja feels embarrassed and shameful even though he approaches her with great politeness. Caja indicates that she must manage the risk of her work being associated with sex work emotionally. However, the transgressive part of the situation also seems to occur when the follower appears offline in front of her and her mother. When the borders between the professional online setting and the private offline setting break down, the exceptional situation described by Caja calls for a new, unexpected form of emotional labour. Caja believes that the norms of managing feelings significantly differ offline from online. Caja feels overwhelmed by the situation and recognises that she does not have the same tools available as she does online when performing emotional labour. These norms are what Hochschild calls "the feeling rules" (Hochschild,

1983/2012). The feelings related to the transfer between digital platforms and face-to-face relationships with customers and followers seem to be an important part of performing *digital-emotional labour*.

Discussion: Emotional labour and the future challenges of work

Our analysis shows how two affordances of digital platforms are especially significant in shaping the emergence of emotional labour: 1) the capacity of digital media to transcend physical space, and 2) the immediacy and multiplicity of the digital distribution of information and data. The close engagement with the interviews has shown how the affordances of digital platforms permeate the performance of emotional labour in the digital platform economy. This study analysed how platforms create *distance* for several young workers. This analysis resonates with previous studies (Gregg, 2011; Tenório & Bjørn, 2019; Wood et al., 2018) on how digital platforms transcend physical spaces and how this affordance calls for new forms of emotional labour. In our analysis, it becomes apparent how the nature of work is entangled with the platform's affordances and creates the new demands of emotional labour together. One significant dimension of emotional labour is mastering the relationship with customers and followers, which remains a key dimension of their work. This task proved to be an act of balance between too much or too little privacy, politeness, engagement, or energy. By constantly monitoring followers' and customers' needs, the workers perpetually regulate these balances, in some cases (the gamers), from second to second. In these emotional adjustments, they negotiate the span between a relation to the followers that is required to appear authentic, preferably free of commercial interests, and a relation where everything is shared and nothing is private – and, on the other hand, the option to keep parts of their lives and selves non-shared and non-commercialised. This dimension of digital emotional labour is particularly exhausting because digital platforms provide the opportunity to monitor customer and follower responses and enable digital workers to fine-tune their performance accordingly. Thus, emotional labour is complex and full of contradictions. This resonates with Hochschild's (1983/2012) point that emotional labour includes managing the self by policing what they want to share and what is not to be shared. Heiland (2021) argues that platform labour is characterised by digital technologies and transformed spatial relations, creating new configurations of emotional labour. We have seen in the analysis that the nature of emotional requirements changes within the different types of digital relations: in confrontation with customers and followers or at a distance while online. The feeling rules intersect with the spatial dimension of the customer and follower relationships involved in the transactions. Our findings illuminate the gendered aspects of these work environments, as women often face heightened vulnerability.

We have identified and analysed the texture of the emotional labour that workers perform *across* different platforms and different types of work that keep followers

and customers happy and satisfied. The analysis shows how workers create and sustain feelings relating to their followers' and customers' private or personal problems, stories, and aspirations. We show that workers must carefully manage and maintain boundaries concerning their privacy. This is a central part of emotional labour for this group of workers. Without the risk of losing followers or customers, they must perform emotional labour that allows customers and followers to feel close and intimate with the gamer, influencer, babysitter, and so on. Thus, this labour is, in a radical sense, boundaryless, not only in terms of time and place but also the emotional costs the work may involve. The exchange of commodities and services via social media and digital work platforms mimics a non-commercialised, personal relationship between two equal parties. This is particularly prevalent when the exchange involves friendship or intimacy. This shows how commodification takes the form of personal colonisation in the digital labour market (Abidin, 2016) and how asymmetrical relationships in the platform economy shape it (Nielsen et al., 2024, p. 59).

Previous studies (Anderson, 2017; Johnson & Woodcock, 2019b; Woodcock & Johnson, 2019; Minseong & Hyung-Min, 2022; Zhang & Wu, 2022) have highlighted the interpersonal interactions between streamers and viewers. In this study, we add to these studies by providing examples of how platform workers constantly fine-tune their emotions as an inescapable part of transforming and maintaining themselves into attractive commodities in different ways. While this study has focused on workers facing unique digital circumstances, its implications extend to broader discussions on the future of labour. The processes of individualisation, precarisation, and platformisation induced (partially) by digital work platforms offer insights into the evolving landscape of labour. As digital platforms increasingly dictate the organisation and distribution of labour, we all rely on their logic in our professional lives. This study serves as a testament to the repercussions of this dependence on platform infrastructure.

As digital platforms continue to shape the future of work, it is crucial to remain mindful of the conditions they create and their implications for workers' well-being. The novelty of this research lies in its examination of emotional labour across various digital work platforms and worker types, including both gig workers and content creators. By analysing different platforms, the study systematically demonstrates that emotional labour demands are prevalent for all workers engaging with digital work platforms. This research confirms existing findings and provides a comprehensive understanding of how emotional labour manifests universally in platform-mediated work, highlighting its significant and widespread impact.

Conclusion

In this study, we deployed the concept of *emotional labour* to analyse extensive qualitative empirical material concerning the working conditions of workers in the

platform-mediated labour market in Denmark. Digital emotional labour is relevant to understanding the core of platform-mediated labour. In particular, the two affordances of digital media are significant in shaping emotional labour: 1) the capacity of digital media to transcend physical spaces by allowing users to communicate across great distances, and 2) the capacity to multiply and distribute information and data immediately.

Moreover, we display the specific characteristics of digital emotional labour: Workers *across* different platforms maintain a positive relationship with followers and customers by simulating friendship or even love. As shown, this labour is, in a radical sense, boundaryless, not only in terms of time and place but also concerning the emotional costs the work may involve. The platform-mediated labour market inevitably entails commodification of the platform workers' selves, and the nature of commodification involves comprehensive emotional labour. This tends to be required to make themselves attractive to potential customers and to uphold their value in digital labour markets. Platform workers are engaged in one thing, regardless of the (service) product they are assumed to sell, providing the well-being of customers and followers across time and space.

This study's limitation is that it does not examine the gendered, racialised, and class-based exposures and emotional demands involved; we recommend that future research address these dimensions. Additionally, we have not delved into the specific differences between individual platforms, which could offer further insights.

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