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**Article — Published Version**

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Digital Geography and Society

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space (IRS)

*Suggested Citation:* Repenning, Alica; Oechslen, Anna (2023) : Creative digipreneurs: Artistic entrepreneurial practices in platform-mediated space, Digital Geography and Society, ISSN 2666-3783, Elsevier, Amsterdam, Vol. 4, pp. 1-10, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.diggeo.2023.100058>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/271214>

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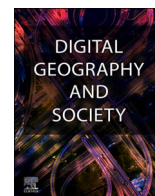
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## Creative digipreneurs: Artistic entrepreneurial practices in platform-mediated space

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Work practices  
Digital entrepreneurship  
Platform economy  
Creativity  
Entrepreneurship

### ABSTRACT

Digital platforms play an increasingly important role in the everyday work practices of creative entrepreneurs and contribute to how their ventures take shape. Taking this observation as a starting point, this paper aims to explore the entanglement of entrepreneurial, artistic, and creative practices and processes with digital platforms. Drawing on interviews and online observations, the study traces the work practices of two creative producers, a textile designer in Berlin, Germany, and a filmmaker in Bengaluru, India, who both extensively use the social media platform Instagram for their work. Based on the two in-depth case studies, we advance the term *creative digipreneurs* to reflect the close relationship between the platform, the entrepreneur, and the artistic venture. Creative digipreneurs represent a novel hybrid role that includes the work practices of independent cultural producers, artists, independent entrepreneurs, and creators. This novel perspective allows us to 1) analyse how creative digipreneurs build up a creative venture while relating to people, the local creative scene in the respective cities, and to digital technologies such as Instagram. The platform-mediated situation of the creative digipreneurs allows us to reflect on the entanglement of online and offline spaces in the entrepreneurial artistic process. 2) We demonstrate that while Instagram presents an important opportunity for the creative development, marketing, and sales of the creative product; it also introduces novel constraints.

### 1. Introduction

*“We are proud to help the more than 90 million small businesses and companies of all sizes on Facebook strengthen their businesses and create jobs” (Meta, 2019).*

Facebook and Instagram have a substantial influence on how entrepreneurial practices, artistic processes, and creative spaces play out today. The independent creative entrepreneurs at the centre of this study face the “commitment” of technology corporations like Meta in their everyday practices, and their ventures are shaped by how they deal with it.

Against this backdrop, we argue that novel cases of creative entrepreneurship have emerged where online and offline practices and spaces are so profoundly entangled that we need a new perspective and a new vocabulary to describe and understand the way that creative entrepreneurial opportunities are pursued. Even though there is a growing body of literature that has been manifested in an increasing investigation of

bloggers (Brydges & Sjöholm, 2019; Parry & Hracs, 2020), so-called creators (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020; Duffy, Pinch, Sannon, & Sawey, 2021; Nieborg, Duffy, & Poell, 2020), platform dependent entrepreneurs (Cutolo & Kenney, 2019), platform workers (Schor, Attwood-Charles, Cansoy, Ladegaard, & Wengronowitz, 2020; van Doorn, 2017), or independent cultural producers (Brydges & Hracs, 2019; Hracs, Jakob, & Hauge, 2013) the practices of *creative digipreneurs* cannot be described by one of the terms alone. Creative digipreneurs are characterised by a new hybrid role that shares some aspects with existing terminologies but is not fully captured by calling them creators, bloggers, platform-dependent entrepreneurs, platform workers, or independent cultural producers, respectively.

This paper demonstrates that creative entrepreneurial practices and spaces differ so substantially from existing forms, practices, and terminologies that we suggest introducing the new umbrella term *creative digipreneur* to describe them. Creative digipreneurs do fall in the category of independent cultural producers; however, not all creative producers have such a close relationship with digital platforms that they

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have become dependent on some of the platform's features to develop the creative vision as well as marketing and sales aspects of their venture. Additionally, creative digipreneurs are not creators or bloggers, but blogging has become part of their work practices. Even though they represent a brand, their products and skills are tightly affiliated with their personal characteristics, and therefore they have also become entrepreneurs of the self.

To research novel creative entrepreneurial practices that evolve in a deep entanglement with digital platforms, this paper aims to answer the following research question: *How are entrepreneurial and creative practices entangled with digital platforms?* Against the background of in-depth empirical insights from two creative entrepreneurs whose work practices and spaces are deeply entangled with the platform Instagram, we describe a Berlin-based textile designer and a Bengaluru-based filmmaker as creative digipreneurs and examine their online practices. The term *creative digipreneur* functions as an attractor to define interrelated creative, artistic, and business-related practices situated in-between on/offline spaces. We define cases that fall under the umbrella of the term *creative digipreneur* as creative and entrepreneurial agents who engage in developing a creative venture that is tightly affiliated with their own skills and values and deeply rooted in the spaces of digital platforms. The close relation to the digital platform has initiated new digital work practices and extended entrepreneurial spaces towards interrelated on/offline spaces.

Against this background, while introducing the attractor *creative digipreneur*, we focus on work practices instead of the structure of working conditions. Accordingly, we set entrepreneurial practitioners' doings and sayings centre stage to get insights into the current world of work, where boundaries between established categories are increasingly blurry. This perspective allows us to introduce the new hybrid role of the creative digipreneur. The creative digipreneur is thus analysed as an assemblage of existing roles such as artists, creators, and independent creative producers. Second, while examining the interface of the platform and the entrepreneurial actor, we propose an assemblage perspective. Such a perspective emphasises the ways in which entrepreneurial practices simultaneously shape and are shaped by the platform-mediated environment in a contingent process. Therefore, we examine how the entrepreneurs shape the digital environment to their ends and examine how the digital platform impacts the entrepreneurial venture. Third, we propose a spatial perspective while focusing on the way that entrepreneurial practices are deeply rooted in entangled on/offline spaces and on/offline communities.

The paper is divided into five sections. First, the theoretical foundations are presented, and an overview of the cases is given. Then, the research design is outlined. Along the lines of grounded theory development, we build up the argument from specific observations from our empirical data to abstraction, building on and extending existing concepts. In section four, the digital practices are outlined, and the specificities of the platformization in the case of the creative digipreneur are demonstrated. In the final section, the paper's contributions are summarised.

## 2. Conceptual background

### 2.1. Platform-mediated entrepreneurship from a practice perspective

We use a practice perspective to grasp this novel form of creative entrepreneurship. That is, we study creative digipreneurs' "routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one [an]other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, [their] background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge" (Reckwitz, 2002, p.249). Following the practice turn in entrepreneurship studies (Champenois, Lefebvre, & Ronteau, 2020; Hjorth & Reay, 2022; Thompson, Verduijn, & Gartner, 2020), we apply an entrepreneurship-as-practice perspective. Thus, we understand the

digital and creative practices as a form of "entrepreneurship" (Johannisson, 2011; Steyaert, 2007; Thompson et al., 2020), that is "the process of creating organisation; it is thus constituted by the processes and practices that make new ways of organising and new organisations come into being" (Hjorth & Reay, 2022, p. 160). As such, entrepreneurial actions are future-oriented because they are motivated by potential future earnings. However, they also always rely on the present societal structures and the competencies, motivations, and background of the entrepreneur (Hjorth & Reay, 2022; Reckwitz, 2002).

For a long time, digital technologies have shaped work and entrepreneurship. As Richardson (2017) argues, digital technologies have extended work practices both temporally and spatially. This means that 'being at work' is increasingly less tied to specific places, such as an office building or working hours spent at those places but rather depends on interactions with technologies. Moreover, the internet has enabled peer-to-peer interaction over distance as an integral practice in everyday work settings and thus changed the spatiality of work (Grabher, Melchior, Schiemer, Schüßler, & Sydow, 2018). In this context, it is not only hard to distinguish between work and free time (Huber, 2013), but also to assign activities to the categories of leisure or labour. Digital media has arrived at the centre of work practices and have come to mediate everyday work lives and spaces (Richardson, 2017). Parry and Hracs (2020) argue that "motivations, practices and outcomes, fluctuate not only over time, but from blog post to blog post" (p. 315). Correspondingly, digital infrastructures render entrepreneurial processes contingent (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). They "enable product ideas and business models to be quickly formed, enacted, modified, and re-enacted in repeated cycles of experimentation and implementation" (Nambisan, 2017, p. 1033). Thus, less stable entrepreneurial outcomes and processes characterise entrepreneurship as an unfinalised, open-ended trajectory (Dimov & Pistrui, 2020). To account for the crucial role that digital platforms, in this case the social media platform Instagram, play in creative digipreneurs' practices of entrepreneurship, we draw on the concept of assemblage. In our study, the assemblage entails the creative digipreneurs and their relationships with people around them, their socio-material urban relations, as well as their practices on Instagram (cf. Ettlinger, 2018). Assemblages are highly contingent constellations, produced through practices that hold different entities of the assemblage together (Anderson, Kearnes, McFarlane, & Swanton, 2012). In our case, that is the assembled material and social relations in urban space, as well as the digitally-mediated interactions on the platform Instagram that hold together, shape, and give meaning to the assemblage of the artistic venture that is pursued by the creative digipreneur we study.

Power in an assemblage is not centralised on one actor but distributed between them (cf. Ettlinger, 2018; Li, 2007). This leaves space for ambiguities and negotiations: platforms cannot determine digipreneurs' practices, but shape them as meaningful actors in a socio-technical assemblage (cf. Ibert et al., 2022). As one of us has argued with regard to gig work, for example, platforms influence work practices by providing a range of possible uses, structuring the field by establishing hierarchies between users, and commensurating 'market value' (Oechsten, in press). Moreover, users of digital platforms are embedded within a globalised data infrastructure built according to the interests of big corporations; that is, as they pursue their own creative and professional goals and make use of the affordances of digital platforms, entrepreneurs often unwittingly contribute to a "data assemblage" (Kitchin, 2014; Kitchin & Lauriault, 2018).

To sum up, the practices we study here are characterised by a continuous process enacted by entrepreneurial, artistic, and digitally-mediated practices. These practices that constitute the assemblage of the creative digipreneur thus include practices that one is paid for, practices of creating something of artistic but not necessarily financial value, and practices of entrepreneurial self-management. Together socio-technical practices on online platforms as well as socio-material relations in urban space shape the assemblage of the creative digipreneur. Below, we will build on this notion to locate the figure of the

creative digipreneur within the literature on creative and digital entrepreneurship.

## 2.2. Between independent cultural producers, digital entrepreneurs, and bloggers

Hracs et al. (2013) define independent cultural producers as

“individuals or small groups who produce cultural goods and services on their own. Examples include individual musicians who are not affiliated with record labels and fashion designers who produce customized items or single collections in small numbers. Crucially, although this mode of production is often dismissed as a niche alternative, it is rapidly becoming a significant source of economic activity and employment in the cultural sector” (p. 1145).

Independent cultural producers are simultaneously creative and entrepreneurial agents (Brydges & Hracs, 2019; Hracs et al., 2013; Lange, 2011). They work in a creative field and need to integrate the challenges that creativity and business pose: while creativity requires openness and playfulness, the business aspect means that they need to plan and control outcomes. As cultural entrepreneurs, their work practices are an amalgamation of business, art, and play, and they strongly identify with what they produce (Hracs et al., 2013; Lange, 2011). Thus, independent cultural producers strike a constant balance between practices of creative exploration and economic exploitation of their creative skills and products (Ireland & Webb, 2009). In line with the literature on enthusiastic actors (Brinks & Ibert, 2015; Grabher & Ibert, 2014), independent cultural producers act because of passion and value their independence. The separation between work and leisure is especially porous here, with creatives identifying strongly with their work on a personal level (Neff, Wissinger, & Zukin, 2005). The rewards for their work are “ranging from the intrinsic joy of creating a piece of art to the extrinsic peer recognition received” (Hracs et al., 2013, p. 1145). In this context, it is hard to distinguish between work and free time (Huber, 2013) and assign activities to the categories of leisure or labour. Online platforms such as Instagram or Facebook are crucial digital spaces for entrepreneurial online practices of small- and medium-sized creative businesses. These platforms are utilised for peer-to-peer engagement, customer engagement, and creating visibility among gatekeepers (Olanrewaju, Hossain, Whiteside, & Mercieca, 2020). Hracs et al. (2013) and Brydges and Hracs (2018), for instance, note the entrepreneurial importance of the online environment regarding branding exclusivity through different forms of consumer interaction and image construction online in the field of fashion design. While these perspectives provide substantial discourses on the offline spaces of creative entrepreneurship and creative work, the online spaces are merely added as a spatial extension or as a novel digital application that supports particular processes or supports novel spatial constellations (Brydges & Hracs, 2019). Therefore, creative and digital work practices cannot be fully understood based on the concept of independent cultural producers (Brydges & Hracs, 2019; Hracs et al., 2013; Lange, 2011).

Literature in the field of organisation studies pioneered in framing the field of digital entrepreneurship to explore how entrepreneurial opportunities in digital ventures are explored online (Cutolo & Kenney, 2019; Nambisan, 2017; Zaheer, Breyer, & Dumay, 2019). This perspective foregrounds that digital platforms play a central role in their work as “digital media technologies become intertwined with entrepreneurial actions” (Horst & Hitters, 2020, p. 24). Nambisan (2017) speaks of digital entrepreneurship to highlight the intersection of digital technologies and entrepreneurship. He defines platforms as digital infrastructures that “offer communication, collaboration, and/or computing capabilities to support innovation and entrepreneurship” (p. 1032). However, research on digital entrepreneurship not only examines how digital tools back practices in the entrepreneurial process but also relies on examining start-ups in the digital economy as focal units of analysis (Kraus, Palmer, Kailer, Kallinger, & Spitzer, 2019; Zaheer et al.,

2019). In this context, Nambisan (2017) speaks of digital entrepreneurship when platforms are the outcome as well as the enabler of pursuing an entrepreneurial opportunity. Ultimately, the advancements to conceptualise online platforms as actors that shape social situations underscore platforms’ role as enabling and impacting work practices based on their underlying business models. Platforms have thus become more than supportive spaces that foster entrepreneurial opportunities (van Dijck, 2013; van Dijck, Poell, & Waal, 2018).

As novel entrepreneurial agents in a digital environment, bloggers or creators have arrived at the centre of discussions on digital entrepreneurship (Cutolo & Kenney, 2019; Duffy et al., 2021). They rely on practices of self-branding, that is, “a form of affective, immaterial labour that is purposefully undertaken by individuals in order to garner attention, reputation and potentially, profit” (Hearn, 2010, p. 427). This labour of self-branding is expressed, for example, in creating digital content or engaging with others online to be more visible or to better one’s position in rankings and ratings (Stark, 2020). With the notion “from leisure to labour”, Parry and Hracs (2020) examine labour practices of blogging as a “purposeful manifestation of efforts, involving a range of skills and tasks such as writing, advertising and monetisation that are performed in physical and virtual spaces around the clock” (p. 315). To be successful, they are required to invest not just time but also parts of themselves and their personalities, becoming “entrepreneurs of the self” (Flisfeder, 2015). Creators blog or post with their audience in mind. The imagined audience of the creator impacts their digital practices. Clues about who is part of the audience are provided through features in the platform environments, such as comments, likes, or follower profiles (Litt, 2012). Thus, the lines between creative and business practices blur, as well as those between person, enterprise, online- and offline practices and representations.

## 2.3. Synthesising creative digipreneurs

To sum up, we introduce the term *creative digipreneur* for a novel form of work that represents a hybrid form of independent cultural producers, digital entrepreneurs, and bloggers or creators. We argue that novel cases of creative entrepreneurship have emerged where online and offline practices and spaces are so profoundly entangled that we need a new perspective and a new vocabulary to describe and understand the way that creative entrepreneurial opportunities are pursued. We therefore suggest extending the concept of the independent cultural producer to the digital realm using the term *digipreneur*. Creative digipreneurs are characterised by creativity, passion, and the central role of digital media in their diverse work practices and workspaces – in our case, the online platform Instagram. Creative digipreneurs rely on providing a haptic product or a direct service that requires a creative skillset. They use digital platforms as central entrepreneurial space for the realisation of their project in addition to other offline spaces such as studios or ateliers. By calling them ‘digipreneurs’, we stress how deeply interwoven their practices of entrepreneuring are with digital media, even if their business does not fall into classical categories of the digital economy. The digipreneurs own a studio or a shop, engage in community meetings and local events, meet with others in coffee shops, or are part of start-up talks. However, to count as a digipreneur, the digital space must be a substantial part of the combined on/offline space. The digipreneurs can imagine turning away from their studio space or their atelier but will hardly ever consider not working on the digital platform. The on/offline spatial situation inherits novel opportunities (Grabher et al., 2018; Nambisan, 2017), as well as constraints (Cutolo & Kenney, 2019; Duffy et al., 2021). Therefore, while the digipreneurs use the platform to their ends and try to bend the online environment according to their individual needs, their practices are also shaped by the platform. Thus, creative digipreneurs’ online practices indicate that their creative venture unfolds in parallel with their online presence on the platform and thus has become dependent on some of the platform’s features (Cutolo & Kenney, 2019).

Against the background of our literature review, we define creative digipreneurs as a sum of the following dimensions:

- *Blurring boundaries of creative work*: The creative digipreneurs present a form of work that blurs the boundaries between entrepreneurship, creativity, art, and passion (Brinks & Ibert, 2015; Hracs et al., 2013; Lange, 2011).
- *On/offline practices and spaces*: Digipreneurs relate to people, technologies, and their surroundings using digital media. They are deeply rooted in combined on/offline spaces where they construct an individual socio-technical assemblage for their creative venture (Ibert et al., 2022). The development of the creative venture and the work practices are co-determined by digital media and strongly dependent on the online space as a place of work (Reppenning, 2022).
- *Novel digital opportunities and precarity*: Therefore, the digipreneur operates in an environment of new digital opportunities (Nambisan, 2017) and novel digital constraints and precarities (Cutolo & Kenney, 2019; Duffy et al., 2021; van Dijck et al., 2018).
- *Entrepreneurs of the self*: The digipreneurs invest part of themselves and manage their personal and brand reputation online and offline (Brydges & Sjöholm, 2019; Flisfeder, 2015; Parry & Hracs, 2020).

### 3. Exploring the cases of Elena and Divyansh as two paradigmatic creative digipreneurs

We explore the work practices of entrepreneuring along the lines of an in-depth case study of two creative digipreneurs, to whom we assigned the pseudonyms Elena, based in Berlin, and Divyansh, based in Bengaluru.<sup>1</sup> Instagram has become the central entrepreneurial and creative space that the digipreneurs engage with for their entrepreneurial practices. Instagram is a space that provides representations of materialised everyday practices of the creative digipreneurs. At the same time, the platform relates to the digipreneurs' practices while providing specific affordances and constraints that are inscribed in the platform's algorithms and digital interfaces (van Dijck, 2013). On the social media platform Instagram, platform users can create accounts with individualised information and post square photos and videos in their feed and vertical 'stories', which are online for 24 hours. More recently, the platform has introduced IGTV and Reels as video features. Instagram also provides pre-configured filters for modifying pictures, and descriptions can be added to pictures and videos. Besides, Instagram supplies features to evaluate other users' posted content in the forms of like-buttons, comments, and follow-functions. The platform algorithms further reward accounts that are positively evaluated by other users.

Divyansh is an ad film director based in Bengaluru, India, who relies on many of the platform's features for his work. He grew up in a small town north of Bengaluru, in a "small bubble", as he describes it. He was fascinated by science fiction films and their special effects and started sketching portraits with pencil, but he did not feel that his rural surroundings provided him with a lot of inspiration or perspectives to pursue his creative passions. When he failed his exams at school, he decided to move to Bengaluru to pursue a diploma and later a Bachelor's degree in animation, specialising in visual effects. When he took a class in film studies in the second year of his studies, he felt like he had finally found his passion; however, he was not sure yet how he could get from his love for films to actually working in the film industry. In the beginning, he worked for free to learn more about different types of

software and techniques and later joined a small digital agency as a creative director. As he wanted to be more autonomous and creative in his work, he quit his job to become a full-time freelancer. Looking for a place to share his ideas and trying to put himself on prospective clients' radar, he started using social media. After trying different platforms, his online presence is now centred on Instagram, where he has around 1500 followers. Divyansh mainly started to post one-minute videos, for example, about his travels and photos on Instagram. Against this background, Instagram provides him a framework to try out new projects and present his skills as an artist to prospective clients. Over time, he shifted to Instagram stories to share snippets of his everyday work, for example, on film sets or creating murals. He also uses the platform to connect with clients, colleagues, and friends. Divyansh's decision to leave his job as a creative director to become a freelancer illustrates that he values his artistic freedom and doing projects he enjoys more highly than stability or earning a lot of money. He enjoys working on ad films, for example, but he would also like to pursue the purely artistic side of filmmaking more, for example, by showcasing his work at film festivals. In Bengaluru, Divyansh also feels at home in the creative scene: it is a small community, where he knows a lot of people. For film shoots, he interacts with model agencies, models, make-up artists, and stylists, for example – and in most cases, they already know each other. However, he also sometimes feels that he would have opportunities to develop his career in film further in cities that are bigger in terms of their film industries, such as Mumbai. He does not have any employees but regularly invites others to work as interns and includes them in his day-to-day work.

Elena is a trained textile designer based in Berlin, Germany. She has a degree in textile design, and her parents are artists, more specifically they are painters. Elena also identifies herself as an artist. She grew up in Portugal and lived in Paris before. Then she moved to Berlin. In Berlin, living costs were relatively low compared to Paris. Additionally, the governmental support she could get there was a pull factor. Also, her parents are originally from Berlin. She thus speaks German and has a German passport. These factors influenced her decision to move to Berlin to independently pursue different creative projects. At a street art festival in Berlin, she got so much positive feedback for one of the creative garment projects that she decided to focus on developing this idea entirely. Her aspiration is to develop this artistic idea in the local scene in Berlin as well as on social media further so that she can stay true to her art but also make a living from it. In her family background she saw how difficult it is to make a living with art. Therefore, she is fond of the opportunities on digital media. Instagram and Facebook allow her to show her art to a broader range of people, to control the creative vision of her art, and not least, the platform presents opportunities to monetize the art she creates. Additionally, the idea of sharing and connecting with like-minded people that digital media promises is important for her. Her signature art is using the urban environment to create prints on t-shirts and other textiles. She covers them in paint and prints every t-shirt by hand with her team. It is crucial to her that she chooses print locations that have a specific attraction for people, such as touristic capitals. Besides the t-shirts, she has also tested how to use this art for a broader range of artistic products. She uses Facebook and Instagram to present the product and the creative vision behind her garments. Further, she utilises social media connected with an online shop to advertise and sell her products. What is more, she posts job advertisements, asks her followers about interesting urban printing locations in their hometowns, and searches for prospective accommodations for her travels. She has been hosted by dedicated Instagram followers of hers for free. Her online presence is centred around pictures and videos of the production process. On Instagram, she posts videos of herself depicting the printing process. Thus, she integrates the performance of the printing process into the art she creates. Additionally, she posts pictures of the atelier in Berlin, photos of events, and spontaneous information about job offers or opening times. Her followers increased because other designers tagged her in her posts, and influential social media accounts posted her videos. To date, she has around 60,000 followers. She also rented a

<sup>1</sup> The former city of Bangalore was renamed 'Bengaluru' by the Indian government in 2014 but is still often referred to by its old name. We refer to the city as Bengaluru here but have left the name unchanged in direct quotes by Divyansh.

brick-and-mortar shop in Berlin. She used the shop for local sales and to prepare and send out online orders. However, due to the covid-19 pandemic, she had to shut down the shop because travel restrictions and the lockdowns introduced a severe threat to her international printing projects and her business model. Therefore, she had to adapt her entrepreneurial spaces accordingly. Additionally, she frequently takes part in local markets or festivals. However, most of her sales are generated online. Her partner, a trained architect, supports the online content production and develops the creative vision together with Elena. Further, she has a part-time employee who organises the requests in the online shop and responds to sale requests issued online.

#### 4. Methods

##### 4.1. Context of the exploratory cases

We have selected our two cases for a more in-depth exploration from a larger sample. We interviewed them for a research project on the role of online platforms in creative work that comprises two case studies. One of them explores how fashion designers in Berlin, Germany, use the social media platform Instagram; the other one asks how graphic designers in India connect to overseas clients via gig work platforms. Overall, we conducted 43 semi-structured interviews with designers and experts with specific insights into fashion and the creative economy and conducted online observations on Instagram and various gig work platforms.

In our analysis for the overarching project, Elena and Divyansh stuck out of their respective samples, surprising us with their accounts in several ways. Both had implemented their creative businesses closely to the affordances of the online platform Instagram, constructing particular on-offline niches for themselves. Moreover, they reflected extensively on how their businesses had developed over time. A description as platform workers would not fit Elena and Divyansh, as they do not predominantly earn money directly through Instagram. Their use of the platform is much broader than is generally the case with gig work platforms or creators. What is more, while Instagram and other online platforms play an essential role for most of the research participants in our sample to promote their products or connect to clients and colleagues, for most of them, their businesses are much more loosely connected with them than in Elena's and Divyansh's case. We argue that Elena's and Divyansh's practices are extreme examples of how a creative venture is built up in a deeply entangled on/offline environment, thus showing how this process unfolds with remarkable clarity. Based on these observations, we chose Elena and Divyansh for an in-depth analysis of the process of artistic venture building, using the other cases in our sample as a backdrop with which to contrast them. Moreover, Elena's and Divyansh's work practices have striking similarities, although they work in different environments and live in different cities within different national contexts. Despite these differences, we have made similar observations regarding their work practices, especially in how they relate to the online platform Instagram. As a filmmaker and a textile designer, they also work in different areas of the creative economy. Moreover, Elena has a much broader reach on Instagram and works with a team of two further people. In contrast, Divyansh has a relatively small follower base and works primarily on his own. That we have found very similar practices in their different local contexts and across different subsections of the creative economy suggests that this is not a niche phenomenon, but that the two of them could be paradigmatic cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006) for a new type of creative entrepreneurial actor, whom we call creative digipreneur.

We focus on the parallels between the two cases against the backdrop of a larger sample here to point out the specific characteristics of creative digipreneurs and to outline the process of constructing an artistic venture between online and offline space. While we had not originally planned to combine our cases from Berlin and Bengaluru, we would argue that being open to surprises and "to diverse aspects of the setting

being interconnected" (Hine, 2015, p. 25) is an essential aspect of an ethnographic approach. Analysing them together is not to say that their local contexts or the specific characteristics of their businesses do not matter for practices of constructing their artistic venture. Our findings suggest that a globally operating platform such as Instagram can be considered as part of their work contexts as much as the environment of a city, for example. Accordingly, we do not strive to treat Berlin and Bengaluru as comparative cases but rather treat them as "cities in a world of cities" (Robinson, 2011).

Along the lines of Elena's and Divyansh's everyday work practices, we explored how creative digipreneurs leverage an on-offline environment to construct their artistic venture.

##### 4.2. Iterative process of data collection and analysis

For this paper, we relied on methods strongly inspired by digital ethnography (Hine, 2015; Pink, Horst, & Postill, 2016). These approaches build on the premise that practices relating to digital technologies need to be studied beyond a divide between 'online' and 'offline' rather than striving to understand 'the internet' (Hine, 2015, p. 29). Leaving notions of the internet as a separate 'cyberspace' behind, digital ethnography seeks to reflect how actors "experience being online as an extension of other embodied ways of being and acting in the world" (Hine, 2015, p. 41) by choosing a "non-digital-centric approach to the digital" (Pink et al., 2016, p. 7). Accordingly, digital ethnography relies on a combination of different methods to grasp practices of interacting with digital media, for example, through observations and interviews. To better understand the two creative digipreneurs' on-offline practices, we collected and analysed the data in an iterative process, contrasting and testing preliminary hypotheses by switching between online and offline data, theoretical and empirical material, and conducting a follow-up interview with Divyansh.

The data from the semi-structured interviews was essential to understand what aims and emotions lie behind the posted content and to gain insights on the impact online platforms have on the personal work-life of the digipreneurs. The data from the online observations were vital supplementary material to gain an impression of what the digipreneurs would post, whom they would connect to via Instagram, and how their posts change and evolve.

We conducted an in-depth analysis of three semi-structured interviews:<sup>2</sup> one with Elena lasting two hours, two with Divyansh lasting one and a half hours, and a follow-up interview lasting one hour. In the initial interviews, Elena and Divyansh shared what their everyday practices look like, whom they interact with regularly, and what the conditions for their work are. While the interviews covered a more comprehensive range of practices of entrepreneuring, the online analysis was focused on how Instagram functions as an anchor for many of these practices. Mirroring our interviewees' reflections on their practices of using Instagram, we compiled an inventory of Instagram's technical affordances (e.g., posting photos/videos with a time limit in a certain frame, stories, commenting, following, liking) and documented and analysed their posting practices. Also, we followed them on Instagram over the year of 2020. We documented the posts with fieldnotes and screenshots, monitoring what they posted in an explorative way to get a feeling for what they posted and how their everyday practices are reflected (Hine, 2015). Additionally, we collected all Instagram posts, including comments and other reactions, by Elena and Divyansh from June and July 2019 (17 posts by Elena, 5 posts by Divyansh), as well as

<sup>2</sup> The interviews with Divyansh were conducted in English; the interview with Elena was conducted in German. All interviews were transcribed for further analysis, and quotations from the interview with Elena were translated by the authors for the purpose of this paper.

Instagram stories (10 stories by Divyansh) from 15 to 22 February 2021<sup>3</sup> for a focused analysis. In addition, we used the categories that we had carved out before to analyse additional posting practices beyond the year 2020; examining posts as materialised practices offered us a more direct access to digipreneurs' everyday practices.

In the analysis, we developed codes from the empirical material reflecting the contingent practices of assembling the artistic entrepreneurial venture. We mapped out the digipreneurs' relations with human and nonhuman actors by focusing on affordances and constraints, highlighting the entrepreneurs' on-offline environment (Clarke, Friese, & Washburn, 2018). We connected the approaches in our follow-up interview with Divyansh to carve out areas of interest that were crucial in Elena's interview, but where we had further questions about Divyansh's perspective: using a shared screen during the digital interview, we anchored his account of his posting practices in specific posts, asking him to describe the practices and intentions behind the post. This provided us with leading questions for a theoretical sampling and selective coding of Instagram posts (Strauss & Corbin, 2003). Following the interview, we mixed and analysed the data while applying a qualitative content analysis of the screenshots, descriptions, and interview transcripts (Brydges & Sjöholm, 2019; Mayring, 2012; Postill & Pink, 2012).

## 5. A novel hybrid role: digipreneurs in-between digital and material space

### 5.1. Constructing the entrepreneurial assemblage: relating online and offline spaces

Creative digipreneurs act at the interface of online and offline spaces while developing their creative venture. The digital platform Instagram is the central online space for the creative digipreneurs. They use the platform as a space where they can present their artistic vision, interact with their respective (trans-)local communities, and build up a venture. The core of Elena's project are the textiles, the printing, the urban art, the photos, the videos, and the live performance. For her project, Instagram has become the central workspace. Over time, she has gained 60,000 followers, who react to her posts with likes or comments and buy the products in her online shop. The platform serves a multiplicity of functions that help her develop her creative venture. Also, for Divyansh, the core of his digital work on Instagram are the videos he posts online that help him to gather attention and reputation for the art that he creates offline for different clients in and around Bengaluru. He creates his videos with different software and then only uploads them to Instagram. The platform influences how the videos turn out: engaging with the constraints of the one-minute time limit and the square format has sparked creativity. He has also developed his unique style with reference to the platform environment by trying to do things differently from what he saw many other Instagram users posting. He narrates how he sees Instagram as a digital canvas for his creativity:

"I wanted to do something of my own, and I wanted to find my audience. Then, I see a platform there that gives me this opportunity. I built something, sort of a product, which is a video. I thought an artist has a plain canvas, a plain paper, I have this square, plain space on Instagram, which I can fill in for 60 seconds. That is what I saw it as. And there is an audience, and the video can reach this audience." (Divyansh).

These examples indicate that the creative digipreneurs co-create their artistic vision and entrepreneurial avenues with the elements available on the online platform. The assemblage of their creative venture relies on available digital platform interfaces that unite with their

artistic visions. They post with their creative vision and platform features in mind. Thus, the online interfaces influence how their creative vision turns out. The online representations co-constitute how the products, their financial income, their work, and even themselves as artists are perceived.

Although they do so much of their work online, offline spaces matter for the two of them. The digipreneurs' performances on Instagram are entangled with their work practices beyond the online realm. Elena's move to Berlin was closely connected with starting her project:

"I tried this project first at a music festival in Portugal. But it was not successful at all. But the project never vanished from my mind. I moved to Berlin, and I presented the project again at a street art festival. I immediately noticed that the people reacted differently. In Berlin, everything was perfect. It was like a difference between day and night. And then I thought I have to start this project here and now." (Elena).

Elena connects to local artists in Berlin and presents her projects at markets and art festivals. She feels that her project fits well with the local scene in Berlin. To grow the number of followers on her Instagram account, she went to street markets and connected her Instagram account to other people to expand her reach. She argues that she needed the offline situation; however, the online interactions were more successful:

"To get many likes, you absolutely have to be mentioned on other social media sites. For example, in the beginning, I participated in local Christmas markets with colleagues who had, for instance, 13,000 followers. I sent them my picture material from our project to make a post about us right away. I also have pictures that they like to share. Because they share the post, some of their followers see it. And then you sell just as many t-shirts online. Their followers see our project, come to the website and buy things, even though they are not at the Christmas market." (Elena).

Via Instagram, Elena can expand the meaning of the t-shirts she creates by uploading videos and pictures of the printing process. The printing process turns the garment into a performance.

"It is just not simply a T-Shirt, it is something else, the T-Shirt emerges from the performance, from a moment." (Elena).

She reflects that without access to the posted content, people do not understand the artistic vision and the story behind the garment. In connection with her videos and posts on Instagram, she can curate the creative process and the performance behind the T-Shirt. Thus, the online representations load the garment with a symbolic meaning of a place, a city, and a creative process and represent the artistic vision behind the T-Shirt.

Divyansh is also firmly rooted in Bengaluru: his circle of friends is made up of creatives based there, and he regularly does freelance work for agencies in the city. While the first contact is often through Instagram, his actual work on set is connected to the local community in Bengaluru. When he goes to film sets or paints murals, for example, he reckons,

"It is a small community [...]. Everything is within Bangalore. [...] the model is from Bangalore; the photographer is from Bangalore. Me as an artist, I am from Bangalore. The production artist is from Bangalore." (Divyansh).

Both Divyansh and Elena consciously tie the content they share on Instagram to their local surroundings. The platform provides interfaces such as geo-tags, hashtags, or references to local events that allow the digipreneurs to reach a local audience, connect with the local community, and ground their posts in a physical environment.

Motivated by the goal to reach the right local audience, to sell her

<sup>3</sup> As Instagram stories are only available for 24 h after being posted, we chose a time within the duration of our analysis.

product, and to benefit from positive associations tied to the city of Berlin, Elena has included Berlin in her Instahandle,<sup>4</sup> uses GPS references of Berlin or the cities she is visiting and makes use of hashtags such as #berlinskyline #berlinmitte #streetartberlin #alexanderplatz #brandenburgertor #travelberlin #visitberlin #loveberlin. Similarly, when he noticed he hardly connected to fellow Bangaloreans via Instagram, Divyansh started using hashtags in his video descriptions related to his city, such as #bangalore or #bangaloreartists. He uses the digital feature of marking his posts with a hashtag to anchor his posts in his immediate surroundings. Moreover, as he argues, Instagram is his primary way to stay in touch with the local community of filmmakers:

“Everybody is kept up to date through Instagram stories. And we rarely hang out outside this shooting scene.” (Divyansh).

Instagram serves both to establish local connections and as a trans-local platform that helps to connect to the creative scene outside of the local community. The creative digipreneurs also have international followers. Accordingly, Divyansh connects to international clients as well as clients in Bengaluru, and Elena ships T-Shirts internationally. Therefore, a trans-local online network connects Elena to people outside of Berlin. For instance, she posted a picture of her online orders. She described how they would be dispatched to the various countries: ‘USA, Canada, Australia, Italy, France, Spain, Belgium, Denmark, Germany’ (observed post from Elena).

The digipreneurs’ connections formed on Instagram extend their reach beyond what they could oversee themselves. Both have connected to people in different cities through Instagram and met up with them when they traveled there. As indicated above, Elena, for example, is regularly hosted by followers in different cities when she goes there for her printing work. Moreover, she crowdsources her Instagram followers’ expertise about their respective cities to find international locations for future projects.

Creative digipreneurs are always situated in a complex constellation of online and offline spaces that they use and interact with to different ends to assemble their creative venture. Keeping online and offline spaces apart is challenging because they are deeply entangled in the creative process, and the digipreneurs rely on different spatial constellations for different ends (Repenning, 2022). However, the online space makes up the central space of interaction. In the interview, Elena even considered closing her studio. However, she would never end her Instagram account and her connected online shop (later, she also shut the studio down due to the pandemic, but her Instagram account remained active). The entrepreneurial assemblage of the creative digipreneurs is constructed with local and translocal connections in mind and using both affordances and grappling with constraints (Ibert et al., 2022). Even though the platform provides the digipreneurs with the affordances to make translocal connections, for instance, shipping the products internationally through the online shop, the digipreneurs also construct locality on the platform. They connect to a local audience and are part of a local community. Even the success of their projects is strongly influenced by existing communities in the respective cities they are rooted in.

## 5.2. Posting in a digitally mediated studio

The digipreneurs use the platform to develop their ideas, as well as to share and promote their art. The notion of posting in a digitally mediated studio will be laid out in this section. We argue here that the platform is one particular element in the assemblage of a creative venture, and that digital platforms shape digipreneurs’ practices. The creative digipreneurs report that the platform has more impact on the development of their creative vision than they would wish for. The features and mechanisms of the platform shape how the project

develops. Overall, it will thus be argued that the platform is a digitally mediated studio that provides feedback, rewards, and constraints and tends to value the business aspect of their work more than the development of their artistic vision.

Elena, for instance, initially argues that Instagram is merely a sales or marketing tool:

“An artist also must eat. Sometimes people think that’s not the case. You just have to be an artist, but unfortunately, that’s not possible. You also must earn money somehow. So, it’s not that I really like social media. I just do it because if you don’t show your product to anyone, you won’t sell it.” (Elena).

In a similar vein, Divyansh describes how he posts stop-motion videos because he eventually thinks he can influence subsequent job requests. Having posted stop-motion films, he argues that his following jobs will be stop-motion films because clients from that area will notice his videos through hashtags and online networks and approach him for a project.

However, both digipreneurs criticize that the platform is not a neutral marketing space that simply follows their commands. Rather, the features on the platform change how their creative project evolves. Elena and Divyansh describe that they constantly strike a balance between where they want to go with the project and where the platform features direct them:

“There is this journey of doing your project or doing what you really like, and then there is a by-product of likes, shares, or people approaching you for work or marketing.” (Divyansh).

“You can use Instagram in quite a variety of ways. But of course, you get three likes at the beginning, oh my God.” (Elena).

Divyansh has an ambiguous relationship with Instagram because he feels that the platform’s mechanisms and logics influence him towards valuing the business side more than the creative side of what he does. He argues:

“I am doing this because I want to be a better filmmaker. I am doing this because this is challenging. But I was also transitioning into getting more likes, which I did not like because, for me, this came from a pure place, but it is going somewhere else. Like I am being greedy.” (Divyansh).

These examples indicate that the digipreneurs are torn between digital performance and evaluation metrics (measured through views and likes and being uncertain and dynamic) (cf. Stark, 2020) and staying true to the purity of their art (cf. Ireland & Webb, 2009). This indicates that there is a danger for the aspects of their work that can more easily be translated into digital performance metrics and therefore seem to promise more palpable results to overrule the artistic aspects of their work.

Divyansh says that he changed his strategies throughout the process and that his emotions and expectations towards the content changed. In this process, Divyansh tried to balance his own ideas with the online reactions of his audience:

“I started doing my project, and I got into a niche market for myself. People started approaching me. They liked what I have put up on Instagram. But then, I reached a place where I personally was not feeling good about the things I was posting. [...] So, I took a break, and it was still organically increasing because I was doing projects. And those projects, I used it to keep it updated on stories only, instead of just posts. So, I was using my shoots wherever I was going. My sketches, shoots, photos, or behind-the-scenes photos through Instagram stories, which also let me do more projects [...] it has led me to be back in the state of posting for my pleasure rather than for an outcome that I desire.” (Divyansh).

When the digipreneurs post, they also think about their “audience”

<sup>4</sup> Username on Instagram



(Divyansh). They are excited and proud if one of their posts prompts more reactions than usual. When Divyansh and Elena post on Instagram, they have the passion for their art and their project in mind and want to illustrate their skills and creativity that come “from a pure place” (Divyansh). At the same time, they post with the platform’s evaluation mechanisms in mind since the number of online reactions contributes to how successful an idea is evaluated and paves the way for the success of future posts. Positive reactions from users initiate positive reactions from other users, and the number of reactions influences how often the algorithm displays a particular post.

While features such as likes, shares, or an increasing number of followers seem to provide direct feedback, it is, in fact, hard for digipreneurs to uncover why some things work while others do not and what lies behind the complex online mechanisms; therefore, we see how the online realm presents the digital entrepreneur with uncertainty:

“Sometimes I do not know if I am doing it right or wrong if I am lucky or skilled. [...] We try many things, but unfortunately, we do not know what the right thing is by now.” (Elena).

The digital response and evaluation mechanism are characterised as uncertain, making it difficult to rely on the online evaluation. On several occasions in the interview, Elena reasons that the online realm follows different evaluation patterns, which are difficult to grasp. She has experienced a video of hers surprisingly going viral, prompting a rush on her online shop, which she was not prepared for. On the other hand, she argues that a side project that she wanted to fund via Kickstarter was not successful because she kept the wrong audience in mind. She describes how she decided to add another layer to her creative project because she wanted to create an art book with pictures of her printing process in different cities. Her plan was to interlink the crowdfunding campaign on Kickstarter with her Instagram account so that the campaign would increase the visibility among her followers, who could then financially contribute to her new business avenue. She was particularly fond of this campaign because the creative vision remained in her hands, and she praised the democratic potential of the crowdfunding system. However, she ended up not receiving enough online support. This storyline indicates the power of the platform’s possibilities and how they also constrain specific development paths. She argues that buying a book or buying a t-shirt are two different things, and her Instagram followers were apparently more interested in textiles than in art-books (cf. Litt, 2012). To her, the evaluation processes in the online realm are “pure lottery”. Also, the internet is a dynamic field that brings uncertainties about “lasting attention” (Elena).

We followed the two digipreneurs by clicking a follow button. As simple as connections are made through a click, as fast they are also dissolved by simply clicking on the same button again to unfollow their accounts. As Divyansh points out: “I do not know for how long it is going to last. But it is nice for now”. Even though digital media provide new possibilities for creative entrepreneurial projects to develop, the digital environment also imposes new uncertainties. The online environment enacted by the platform is fast-paced, dynamic, and steered through opaque algorithms. Thus, it raises uncertainties. What van Doorn (2014) has called ‘affective ambiguities’, then, is expressed in trying to master the rules of a game which are both obfuscated and changing all the time. This practice of managing uncertainty is influenced by the fact that the creative digipreneurs have become dependent on some of the platforms’ features to successfully develop their creative venture (Cutolo & Kenney, 2019; Duffy et al., 2021).

We argued at the beginning of this paper that creative digipreneurs have a hybrid role. They are located between roles of digital entrepreneurship, creators, and creative-cultural producers and artists. Further, their work is located between online and offline spaces that are equally important. This section indicated that there is a conflict between these roles. The digipreneurs use the platform because they value their independence and agency in developing their project. However, they have become dependent on some features of the platform to earn money.

Therefore, their work is also closely connected to the work of creators. For instance, they need to post with the audience in mind (Litt, 2012). The digipreneurs report that it is sometimes difficult to balance between where they see the artistic vision of their project and where the platform leads their project. Posting in a digitally mediated studio refers to how the feedback and evaluation metrics on the platforms shape how the artistic project evolves because the platform mechanisms support certain features and constrain others.

## 6. Conclusion

With the notion of the creative digipreneur, we propose a new hybrid role that combines the practices of creators / social media influencers, creative-cultural producers, and digital entrepreneurs. Creative digipreneurs are located between these categories, and their practices cannot be described with reference to one category alone. With the notion of entrepreneurial assemblage construction, we first highlight that the digipreneurs’ art venture is constructed in the local spaces and the creative scenes of the respective cities where the digipreneurs are located (similar to creative-cultural producers or culturepreneurs). Additionally, Instagram is their central digital space of work. They use the platform to make art as well as marketing and sales connections (similar to the role of creators). Finally, digipreneurs value their independence and want to build up a novel creative venture in their respective urban scenes of the cities but also while using digital media. They are trained with a degree in the creative or artistic disciplines. Therefore, they work for their own brand and follow their own artistic pursuits while developing a business idea that secures their income (similar to the role of the digital entrepreneur). We show that the entrepreneurial assemblage is firmly rooted in the local creative scene, but the platform augments local connections and allows a trans-local reach (cf. Reppenning, 2022). Therefore, the art venture emerges from entrepreneurial actors’ practices of forming local connections as they interact with urban spaces and local communities. Additionally, digital platforms augment local connections and transcend their reach beyond the local creative scenes of their cities.

The notion of “posting in a digitally mediated studio” adds a critical account to the hybrid role of the creative digipreneur. It underscores that the digipreneurs’ independence and their creativity are at stake because they are overruled by the platform mechanisms. We argue that Instagram is an actor in the assemblage of creative digipreneurs’ ventures that has gained a powerful role in the development of the creative vision, marketing, and sales. Creative digipreneurs define themselves as artists and not as social media influencers. Yet, working as a social media influencer has become part of their daily work-life because they sell their products, their brand, and part of themselves on the platform. In their daily work, they must strike a constant balance between their own artistic vision and what works on Instagram. This negotiation is often-times conflicted. For instance, we show how the features on Instagram, such as likes or other performance metrics, the posting formats, or the audience on the platform shape the project more than the digipreneurs would wish for. Consequently, digital technologies are part of their work on a deeper level than providing opportunities and constraints for their creative venture: they are implicated in a co-constitutive relationship with work practices and spaces. Additionally, we highlight that working with Instagram as creative digipreneurs adds novel elements of uncertainty. Evaluation and feedback mechanisms on art weeks or festivals seem to be easier to work with than the invisible mechanisms on the platform that Elena describes as a lottery.

In sum, the platformization in the field of creative digipreneurship reveals a novel hybrid role of creative work where the boundaries of existing categories are increasingly transcended. The creative digipreneur unites artistic elements, entrepreneurial features, creative work, and play, as well as the work of a creator. The roles are assembled towards a new category of creative digipreneurship. The perspective of creative digipreneurs examines work that takes place in the spaces of the

platform and in the local spaces of the respective cities. It critically evaluates that platforms introduce new opportunities for developing an artistic skillset towards a business venture. Additionally, this perspective shows how artistic and entrepreneurial elements are co-shaped and even overruled by the features on the platform Instagram. Therefore, the role of the creative digipreneur is characterised by a divided agency and a conflicting relationship between the technological features and their own motivations as artists, as well as a divided spatial constellation in-between online spaces on Instagram and offline spaces in their respective studios or cities.

By exploring creative digipreneurs' artistic practices, we have aimed to elucidate the crucial role of digital platforms for practices of entrepreneurship. Thus, we contribute to a nuanced and flexible understanding of the assemblage of local and translocal, as well as online and offline practices that artists employ as they try to strike a balance between work and play. The lens of practices of assemblage has helped us to better understand creative digipreneurs' hybrid role, as it has allowed us to combine personal relationships, relations to urban space, and digitally mediated relations in one framework. Moreover, the distributed agency between creative digipreneurs and the platform Instagram and the contingency of building up a creative venture are reflected in the contingent relations of the assemblage: the role that Instagram plays for the digipreneurs in this study fluctuates and is continuously negotiated as they navigate their artistic and entrepreneurial paths.

While the focus on everyday work practices yields important insights, future research in the study of platform-mediated entrepreneurial practices should pay attention to how daily practices are embedded within value creation in a platform economy. The question of agency is affected by this, as the digital economy is powered by free contributions that are “[s]imultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited” (Terranova, 2000, p. 33). When creative digipreneurs produce videos or pictures and post them on Instagram, for example, their “cultural and affective desire for creative production” (Terranova, 2000, p. 36) is expressed as free labour that is motivated by potential future earnings.

## Funding

As a member of the Leibniz-Association, the IRS and thus this research is funded by the Federal Republic of Germany as well as the Federal State of Brandenburg. The publication of this article was funded by the Open Access Fund of the Leibniz Association.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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