Between “World Class Work” and “Proletarianized Labor”: Digital labor imaginaries in the global South

Cheryll Ruth Soriano
Jason Vincent Cabañes
De La Salle University—Manila, Philippines

Accepted version. 18 October 2019

Original citation
Soriano C.R. and Cabañes J.V. (2019) ‘Between “world-class work” and “proletarianized labor”: Digital labor imaginaries in the global South.’ In Polson E., Clark, L.S., and Gajjala, R. (eds.) *The Routledge Companion to Media and Class.* New York, NY: Routledge.

This chapter’s[1] focus lies in the nexus between the ethical challenges of labor exploitation as well as the conditions surrounding complex imaginaries of agency in the digital economy. The increasing global connectivity and the relative affordability of technology have heralded the rise of online platform labor or digitally-mediated service work. Platform workers (also referred to as online freelancers in this paper) engage in digitally-mediated work through online labor platforms and microwork intermediaries such as *Freelancer.com, Onlinejobs.ph, Sama-Source* and *Upwork* (formed from a merger of *Odesk* and *Elance* in 2015). Although these workers are largely concentrated within the Global South, the demand for platform work comes from the Global North[2].

Marketed as a geographically-flexible and competitive source of income, digital labor is touted as a highly viable and attractive option, especially in countries where employment conditions are fraught with financial stagnation and socio-economic tensions. The ‘globalization’ of business services propelled by the development of information and communication technology (ICT) allowed for the relocation of voice-based call centres and other back-office processes from the Global north to the Global

south. Ranked as having the worst unemployment rates in Asia but with a large English-proficient population, the Philippines has become one of the the prime sites of BPO work.[3] Data on the labor supply in the gig economy shows that the country, together with India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan are the major sources of labor supply. The Philippine government champions digital labor as a way to overcome the various employment woes faced by countless Filipino professionals across age groups and educational background. The government sees platform labor as a complement to other forms of BPO work, an alternative to overseas labor migration, a catalyst for urban and rural development, and an attractive option for young graduates. In the same vein, some of the Filipino online platform ‘gurus’ whom we interviewed for this research say that many Filipino professionals are also migrating to online platform labor in exchange for autonomy, spatial flexibility, and the possibility for higher earnings. Indeed the focus of this chapter is on our interviews with these very individuals who are engaged in the gig economy and who obtain work through digital labor platforms. Many of them have moved to platform labor and online freelancing from the ‘drudgery’ of call center work. It is also important to note, however, that those who were once deemed as undesirables under traditional labor standards – such as those with physical disability, chronic illnesses, or low educational attainment–are now able to compete for jobs based on skills and project portfolio in these digital labor platforms.

In contrast to local aspirational narratives, the ‘Western’-based literature on digital labor in the Global South has been critical of the realities of such work[4]. In many ways, these studies echo the scholarship on digital labor in the Global North, which describe the pernicious conditions that digital workers face, from exploitation to isolation

to the colonization of personal space.[5] Although these studies do the important work of training their lens on the problematic realities of digital labor in the Global South, they at times insufficiently address how workers might negotiate with, resist, and even challenge their unfavorable work conditions.[6]

This paper attempts to avoid both overly optimistic and pessimistic accounts of the ‘on-demand’ global economy and of ‘platform labor’ in the Global South. To do this, it goes beyond simplistic explanations of un- or under-employment. We consider how the socio-cultural and economic complexities of the worker environment might drive the attractiveness of this form of labor and how histories of colonialism might make local employment and upward mobility less of a viable option for workers from the Global South. The paper draws from an ethnographic inquiry on online freelancing in the Philippines, examining the experiences of Filipinos who engage in online freelancing and the entwined imaginaries of class and coloniality that draw them to this work. Rooted in the meanings that workers themselves ascribe to their working engagements, the affective elements of digital labor may perhaps be understood through various perspectives other than rigid concepts long associated with exploitation. Digital migration is possibly one of the limited ways workers from the Global South can participate in a globalization that is still Global-north centric. In the context of Filipino workers, these include imaginaries that underscore how it is that as a result of their cultural embeddedness, workers might have alternative and more positive perceptions of their work.

Digital Labor in the Global North and South

There is already an established set of research about digital labor in the Global

North. Many of them stem from a critique of Richard Florida’s notion of the rise of the ‘creative class’, which was about this new group of socio-economic subjects who had jobs based on creativity and individual talent and who could usher cities into a new era of economic development and prosperity[7]. This notion became quickly popular with policy makers and city planners who started to imagine the development of ‘creative cities’. But just as quickly, scholars have roundly challenged its celebratory vision. They say that this notion neglects social inequalities and class divisions as well as the many forms of exploitation that are experienced in the world of creative labor.[8]

Recent works on creative labor have talked about ‘flexible exploitation’, which pertains to the double-edged nature of creative work that affords people new ways of working but also brings with it new kinds of precariousness.[9] For example, the temporal and spatial flexibility that has come to be one of the most powerful selling point of contemporary labor has also resulted in ‘presence bleed’, where the always on phenomenon in the context of creative and digital work is brutally colonizing the personal space of contemporary workers.[10] There is also ‘self-exploitation’ that describes how workers in creative fields are willing and prepared to take the risks of precarious creative work in hopes of obtaining fulfillment and even fame.[11] This notion goes hand in hand with the prevalent culture of ‘free labor’ among creative industries, which then subjects workers to carry out unpaid labor in hopes of reaping the benefits of these ‘gifts’ somewhere along the career line.[12] There is also emerging scholarship that is particularly focused on ‘microwork’ or ‘platform labor’ which is accused of effacing the long history of racialized and gendered exploitation of low-income workers[13].

Parallel to the abovementioned studies, there is a relatively small but growing

collection of works on digital labor in the Global South. Taking a largely critical position, most of these works express concern about how people engaged in digital labor in the less developed regions of the world have even more precarious experiences.[14] Because demand is geographically concentrated in the Global North, workers from the global South and other parts of the world find themselves competing for hyper-specialized, undervalued, and low-paying jobs. Idealistic notions of the value of affect and self-fulfillment, subjectivity, autonomy, and solidarity were found to have been directly challenged by accounts of anxiety from financial and career instability, physical exhaustion, increasing levels of stress, as well as social isolation.

Whereas online labor platforms have empowered workers to perform skill arbitrage or the process of selling their labor to whoever is willing to buy it for the best price, the asymmetry of the labor market as engendered by the fierce competition results in an environment conducive for the exploitation of ‘labor arbitrage’, or the process of sourcing for the cheapest labor available.[15] As the majority of digital workers hail from the Global South, where the currency and standard of living is relatively low, cases of underbidding and a generally unstandardized pricing process characterize the online labor platforms, much to the advantage of clients[16]. Consequently, researchers have noted how these conditions severely diminish the bargaining power of digital workers. In particular, workers note feelings of isolation as a result of working long and irregular hours at intense speeds along with concerns about their job security and, sometimes, low income, all of which are issues that researchers attribute to the ubiquitous discrepancy of wages in platform labor[17]. Because of the dispersed geographic nature of digital work, clients are able to exploit workers from low-income

countries in that they can buy labor at significantly lower rates in the guise of being considered above average in the context of the worker’s geographic position. Furthermore, the dispersed geography of digital work engenders irresponsible market practices by clients who end up taking advantage of the lack of mandated wage regulations on digital work.

These conditions have led to some quarters to call such working environments as “digital sweatshops.”[18] Many of the concerns about platform labor involves the low pay and the absence of bargaining and organizing capability of workers in the platform that lend them prone to abusive work conditions. Yet, confronted by overwhelming accounts of exploitation in the various socio-technical ecosystems of digital labor, one would ask, what draws thousands of workers from the Global South to such forms of labor? Are these to be characterized simplistically as “forced” labor due to perilous unemployment conditions in economically marginalized countries? What explains the striking contrast in the narratives drawn from these scholarly works with local articulations on digital labor?

Class, coloniality and digital labor imaginaries in the Philippines

This paper argues that in the case of the Philippines, the entwined imaginaries of class and coloniality are crucial to understanding why many workers are attracted to digital labor and to online platform work. Here we define class beyond the narrow concept of the economic, but through the broader lens of the social.[19] This entails including two complementary ideas about contemporary social class. One is the Weberian idea of class as “a social category pertaining to individuals or groups sharing comparable behaviours, characteristics, and way of life”.[20] The other is the Bourdieusian

idea of class as “reproduc[ing] social divisions [through] individual practices, subjectivities, and perceptions”.[21] Meanwhile, we take coloniality to mean “long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations”.[22] We also acknowledge its contrapuntal postcolonial consciousness, that pertains to how subjects possess a history and a way of being that resists or subverts being entirely defined by coloniality and capital.[23]

Given this polysemic nature of class and coloniality, we define these imaginaries through a post-structuralist lens, that is, as sets of socially shared representational assemblages and practices that function as contingent anchor points in terms of emerging relationships of individuals to their conditions of existence.[24] As an embodied practice of transcending both physical and sociocultural distance[25] and empowered by mediated images and discourses, colonial imaginaries about economic, social, or cultural mobility have changed the way people collectively envision their world and the possibilities within it. In the case of the Philippines (and potentially in other Global South contexts), these entwined imaginaries can simultaneously cast the middle class status of digital workers as marginal and aspirational.[26]

To be sure, some quarters in the Philippines rightly claim that while digital labor in the country offers many Filipinos the possibility of making it to the middle class, they are only marginally so (for example, David 2014). In sheer economic terms, the salaries of digital workers place them within the country’s middle classes whose monthly income range from PhP 15,780.00 (approx. USD 308.00) on the lower end to PhP 157,350.00 (approx. USD 3071.00) on the higher end.[27] But at the same time, digital workers are

often thought of as being akin to the “marginal middle class”, who are “wage- and salary-earning clerical workers”.[28] They are compared less favorably to the so-called “new middle class”, who are “professional and technical workers on the one hand, and wage- and salary-earning administrators, executives, and managers on the other hand”.[29] And this less than favourable comparison also holds with the “old middle class”, who are “nonprofessional, nontechnical self-employed workers other than those in the informal sector and the primary industries, as well as employers outside the primary industries except for those holding administrative, executive, and managerial positions”.[30]

What makes the precariousness and ‘marginal middle class-ness’ of digital labor in the Philippines distinct is the jobs mismatch that predominate this kind of work, which is often characterized as ‘low prestige’ in the Global North.[31] This labor is primarily comprised of offshored low-skilled occupations being taken up by the country’s highly educated and young workforce.[32] The country’s business process outsourcing (BPO) industry in particular is dominated by work in call centers, transcription, and content moderation, which are taken up by college graduates, including those from the top universities. They are ‘based on a narrow job description and offer only limited opportunities for acquisition of knowledge and skills replicable in other professions’ and, crucially, often have poor “longer-term employment prospects”.[33]

As a counterpoint, however, it is also important to consider the perspectives of the digital workers themselves. By this we mean taking into account their ‘worker agency’, which pertains not only to their act of making choices and or acts of resistance, but also to the process of their subject (re)formation.[34] And the latter is replete with

conflicting logics and contradictory impulses, where workers may collude with inasmuch as challenge existing structures. For many Filipino workers who do digital labor, for instance, the downbeat class imaginary of ‘marginal middle class-ness’ runs alongside a more positive colonial imaginary of being a ‘global worker’. They see themselves as holding not just any white-collar job, but one that is linked to the global flow of industries and, as such, to a global and flexible lifestyle.

BPO work, for instance, is described as happening in “hip workplaces, situated in upscale business districts, utilizing latest technology, and servicing top global corporations…[they] offer the chance to build a career with a growing company catering to international clients”.[35] Many of its workers are proud of their proficiency in English, which is a “high prestige” language in the country, owing in part a history of American colonization and in part to English being the lingua franca of contemporary globalization.[36] These workers also appreciate how their jobs afford them access to some of the perceived markers of a global middle-class lifestyle, such as wearing fashionable clothes to parties and hanging out for coffee in Starbucks.[37]

In the ensuing discussion, we go beyond the often-studied BPO workers and present the digital labor imaginaries that predominate particularly with online freelance workers in the Philippines. We show how the imaginaries of this specific subgroup of digital workers articulate an assemblage of classed and colonial perspectives of agency and false aspirations created by the digital economy. To view these online freelance workers as mere victims implies positioning them within an interpretive framework of either oppression or resistance to normative structures and discursive constructions. In exploring the motivations, meanings, and values that digital workers ascribe to their

jobs, we discuss how norms and discourses are inhabited in order to understand what makes individuals both identify and resist certain subject positions. Imaginary relations are managed by individuals who are culturally and historically located and hence embedded within specific relations of power.[38] A critical analysis of imaginaries may thus also offer a deconstruction device of ideological, political and cultural stereotypes.

The digital labor imaginaries of Filipino online freelance workers

Drawing from in-depth interviews and analysis of multiple texts circulating in online freelance forums, Facebook groups, and ‘freelancer’ events, we looked at how freelance workers and platform managers enacted and articulated classed and colonial digital labor imaginaries. We have identified three such interconnected imaginaries and label them as follows: that of ‘distinction,’ ‘transcendence,’ and ‘flexibility’. In fleshing out these digital labor imaginaries, we also discuss the role of virtual spaces, online communities, and the influencers who help push these imaginaries within the digital platform. In exploring digital labor in the context of its socio-political and cultural embeddedness, we aim to show how workers constituted a sense of self and agency while being embedded in aspirations that were fraught at best and false at worst.

Imaginary of ‘distinction’

One key classed and colonial imaginary of online freelance workers we interviewed was that of ‘distinction’. This pertained to their belief in the exceptionality of Filipinos when it came to skilled global service work. They situated themselves within the long history of their compatriots fulfilling labor shortages throughout the world, as nurses and domestic workers, as seafarers and agricultural workers, and as cooks and cleaners.[39] They saw themselves in particular as a special class of workers who

possessed distinct traits that matched the requirements of digital labor as ‘world class service workers’. Crucially, they often articulated this idea in comparison with individuals from ‘competitor countries’--such as India and their Southeast Asian neighbors--drawing on cultural stereotypes that put down other nationalities for being less professionally skilled than them.[40]

In an article,‘Why Pinoys and BPOs are a good fit’, this ‘goodness-of-fit’ is attributed to unique Filipino values:

> It’s the values in our culture that make Filipinos suitable for the job. We are known to be hospitable, accommodating, and empathetic, and these are vital traits to have for a job that requires a lot of interaction....Filipinos are willing to adjust their lifestyles, which is asked of many BPO employees.[41]

A majority of the workers we interviewed did talk about having a distinct suite of skills attractive to the digital economy, which included English proficiency, digital literacy, willingness to serve, and an entrepreneurial spirit. Some of them narrated that this was what actually led them to digital work. Online freelance work allowed them to break free from the difficult or abusive work conditions they faced in their previous jobs as call center workers, overseas labor migrants, and even advertising and TV production staff. And they were happy that in their new work, they had achieved a comparative level of success by ‘earning the same or higher amount of salary’ (Gino, male, 42) or ‘building a diverse portfolio of skills useful to the global economy’ (Cris, female, 43). The continuity from BPO or media-related work and online freelance work also added to this imaginary of distinction. As freelance worker turned coach Gino (male, 42) shared,

> It is about the experience of talking to foreign people and of course the customer service culture you know, serves us well. So although it is not a direct continuation, those with BPO experience have a good chance of thriving in this career because of entrepreneurial skills that prepare us for online freelancing, and that’s an advantage.

This imaginary of ‘distinction’ was, in key ways, also driven by how the Philippine government has used labor brokerage as one of its neoliberal strategies to bring in much-needed foreign currency inflows.[42] This government has actively branded the nation as one that systematically trains and exports service workers for the global market. And this is predominantly constructed as a ‘natural global order of things’ that Filipinos should accede to and benefit from. This mirrors what Irani retells as the illusion created by the 18th century Mechanical Turk with that of the ‘joyful optimism’ and ‘celebrations of creativity’ being sustained by the precise invisibility of microworkers who are tasked to take on the unwanted jobs in high-technology workplaces.[43] By marketing the nature of microwork platforms as ‘human-as-a-service’, these microworkers are rendered as mere ‘standing reserve’, faceless and as dispensable as the other.[44]

In the last decades, the Philippine government has continually touted the mantra of Filipinos being ‘world class service workers and ‘modern heroes’, helping drive labor export despite the precariousness associated with such work. As former Philippine President Gloria Arroyo said in a 2003 speech,

> I am not only the head of state responsible for a nation of 80 million people, I am also the CEO of a global Philippine enterprise of 8 million Filipinos who live and work abroad and generate billions of dollars a year in revenue for our country”.[45]

Digital labor has been envisioned to address unemployment and rural development in the country, but also as an alternative to foreign labor migration. The labels of ‘modern heroes’ and ‘world class workers’ that have been previously attributed to overseas Filipino workers were in fact being gradually conferred on online freelance workers too. They were thought to be the OFW 2.0; no longer the ‘Overseas Filipino Worker’ but the ‘Online Freelance Worker’. This was because through digital labor, one still earns dollars and performs as a ‘global worker’, only this time without having to be away from home.

The ambiguous construction of the ‘good service worker’ was heightened by the expectations that foreign clients had about Filipinos. According to Mr. NJ (male), founder of an online labor platform primarily catering to Filipinos,

> We only work in the Philippines because it’s a different experience working with Filipinos than with anybody else in the world. Filipinos are honest, they are loyal, they are hardworking, they speak really good English... Filipinos will do all kinds of stuff to make their employer happy. Also, generally, across the board Filipinos are not entrepreneurial either and that’s a big deal for a lot of entrepreneurs to be able to hire someone who is not, they don’t have to fear who is going to steal their business. So the Philippines provides a unique situation, a unique setup of cultural difference that makes it different than anywhere else in the world.

But Cynthia (female, 39), a freelance worker who had achieved an influential position in the freelance community, disagreed that Filipino workers should necessarily subscribe to these expectations and ideals. She said:

> We Filipinos, we are hardworking, we complain about different things but usually not to the foreign client. Also we are willing to do everything, even overtime to please a client. I think this makes us preferred workers but also makes some of us prone to abuse.

Clearly then, articulating the characteristics of ‘distinction’ enables the fashioning and nation-branding of Filipino online freelancers as highly valuable and competitive ‘world class workers’. At the same time, however, it constructs Filipino subjects not only as a global commodity and a colonized subject, but also as pliable servants unlikely to steal clients’ ideas.

Imaginary of transcendence

A second classed and colonial imaginary that the online Filipino freelance workers had was of ‘transcendence’. Many of them subscribed to the idea that having to overcome difficulties was not only demonstrative of their positive qualities as a digital worker, but was also crucial to their overall self-development. Contemporaneous with modern capitalist thought, the freelance workers saw the experience of triumphing over tough work conditions not only as a means to career success, but also ‘as self-realization, as human self-fulfillment and development’.[46] Unfortunately, this belief easily became co-opted into the earlier discussed idea of ‘self-exploitation’ in creative industries[47], which is about this internalised belief that to be competitive and attain success, one should be able to tolerate pay that is often non-commensurate to one’s skills and effort and work conditions that are often unfair. This belief in transcendence also aligned easily with the related idea of ‘free labor,’ where workers agree to do

unpaid labor in hopes of reaping the benefits of these ‘gifts’ somewhere along the career line.[48]

The imaginary of ‘transcendence’ of the freelance workers also seemed to be tied to the Filipino colonial experience of being stereotyped as indolent.[49] They wanted to show that, above other workers from other countries, they could turn in high quality work even in the most trying of circumstances. What further reinforces this thinking is the culture of audit and accountability in digital platforms, crystallized in the ratings systems that enable employers to give feedback on the freelancer’s “service.”[50] Indeed, the on-demand model of platform labor “conjures an all-too-familiar colonial imaginary of pliable servants” who may be “disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labor force and thoroughly surveilled and mined for value”.[51]

The freelance workers often expressed the imaginary of ‘transcendence’ by building a resilience-based reputation and, subsequently, visualising the success that results from this. As Cris (female, 43) narrated, “I used to get the lowest rate just to get the job when I was starting.” She further shared that many of her peers have done the same with the belief that the rate will later increase when one has proven oneself. However, increasing one’s rates is not always realized. As Karen (female, 26) puts it,

> In terms of pay... people don’t know you so you have to lower your fees but if you’re established already as a good worker and have the skills you can raise your fees. But it becomes a dilemma whether to raise their fees or not because in freelancing there are lean and peak seasons, if it’s lean season some people just want to get clients even when the rates are not ideal.

In the end, working hard and earning a reputation did not really give all workers full control, as they still had to deal with the structural limits of labor arbitrage or constraints of labor oversupply. Certain workers who managed to take advantage of reputational capital are able to secure the trust of loyal clients, move from labor platforms to being directly hired, or turn into coaches and trainers. It is these people who appear to feel more fulfilled and gain a sense of stability.

This practice of building a reputation around resilience had strong classed and colonial inflections. It reinforced a dynamic that made the workers feel that their drive for self-improvement and social mobility were in line with what was deemed desirable by global capital.[52] Reputation here shaped the workers’ idea of resilience and is crucial in their imaginary of transcendence. In an economy characterized by the diffusion of project-based employment and visible, quantified, and accumulated client ratings, the rise of online freelancing highlights the importance of reputation-building and resilience. Often, the workers legitimized both the need for hard work and resilience by visually instantiating the promise of success. This further reinforced the idea of an alignment between the workers’ self-improvement and social mobility on one hand and the desirable qualities of workers needed by global capital on the other hand.

Indeed, visualisations of success were actively crafted, shared and circulated by the online freelance workers and also by influencers. Take for instance *“Katas ng freelancing”* (Fruits of Freelancing), a thread in one of the Facebook online freelancing community groups that was meant for posting ‘what one is able to buy or achieve’ with digital work. The header of this thread stated,

> Here we can share to other freelancers all that we have worked hard for. The fruits of our hard work from being a freelancer. Here we can share what we have managed to acquire: car, house, business, etc. This is not to boast about our material possessions but we want to look back at the hard work and what we managed to accomplish. That in freelancing, THESE ARE ALL POSSIBLE.

Under this thread, digital workers shared photos of the ‘fruits’ of their freelancing career that ranged from the material (from house to car to a new laptop) as well as the immaterial (such as having their children graduate from good private schools) and actively commented on each other’s posts to show support. The fact that such ideas needed to be articulated and visualized implied that there was a need to assuage the doubt that some potential freelancers had about the legitimacy and reliability of online work. This was particularly salient because our interviews showed that some freelancers remained ambivalent about whether online freelancing was gainful or sustainable. As online freelancer Red (male, 24) admitted, it is hard to predict sustainability because one always fears that ‘foreign clients will come and go’ and ‘freelancing work is becoming seasonal and more and more competitive.’

Here one can see the crucial role that coaches and influencers in the online freelancing community took not only in creating aspirations of middle classness, but also in articulating the norms of global capital as constitutive of good work. Online freelancing coaches and community leaders, a growing league of influencers in the local digital labor economy, also expanded the fruits of hard labor to the ‘immaterial’. They created the notion that anyone can be like them, successful, entrepreneurial, well-networked, and ‘contributing to bigger social good’, but achieved all these through

sacrifice and hard work. In reality, some of these influencers achieved their status by harnessing other forms of capital, such as educational attainment, strong social or familial networks, or some financial wealth. Unfortunately, such skills and assets that allowed one to flexibly navigate across digital labor spaces and achieve a negotiating position with clients were not as easy to come by for the others.

Clearly, the freelance workers have an imagination that upon crossing a certain threshold one can perhaps achieve the reality of the "global knowledge worker class," one characterized by the recruitment materials of digital labor platforms. At the same time, Filipino workers see this performance of extra labor, patience, and suffering beyond the economic and the material and instead as a reflection of virtue and values of care, self-worth and meaning that connects work with inner notions of being (i.e. "producing a better version of oneself" as one worker has put it). Unfortunately, it is also true that sometimes, they end up competing and sacrificing for jobs that are relatively insecure and unprotected.

Imaginary of flexibility

Finally, online Filipino freelance workers also articulated the classed and colonial imaginary of flexibility. For many of the workers we interviewed, their job brought into focus how they were connected to the infrastructures of global connectivity that drove the digital labor platforms in which they worked. It also highlighted how they were able to find ways of avoiding the infrastructural immobility--heavy traffic, bad roads, inefficient public transport--that characterized contemporary middle class life in the congested urban landscapes of the Philippines.[53]

Online freelancing has made the freelance workers rethink their standards of ‘good work’[54] since they have experienced digital work as a site for negotiating flexibility and the attractive fluidity of ‘work-leisure-care spaces’ that might challenge ‘traditional’ models and cosmologies of professionalization of work. As online freelance worker Mark (male, 27), content writer and specialist in search engine optimization narrated,

> You get to work at the comfort of your own home. Traffic is invisible to you, you don’t really care about traffic as much and you get to enjoy perks of working in your house clothes. You don’t have to dress up for anyone. In that sense, you’d get to save money from buying clothes because you don’t have to impress your boss anymore… and you also get to save money from travel fees—no need to pay for jeep or UV express *(modes of public transportation in the Philippines)*. And no more sudden corporate hangouts. No more Friday nights, you can just schedule it whenever you are comfortable. No longer peer pressured in spending money in unnecessary (ways).

Our respondents shared the amount of time wasted from commuting to and from work with their previous corporate jobs: ‘It used to be about 3 hours from my house to work, if I’m lucky, 2.5 hours one way, so that’s about 5 hours wasted.’ (Anne, 41, female, Virtual Assistant and former online transcriber and book question writer). She believes that savings in terms of travel time has afforded her the space to flexibly take on more jobs which in turn helped broaden her skillset.

Many of the workers we interviewed appeared to attach more value to these flexible work arrangements that online freelance work afforded them, than the absence of health benefits and job security.

Other workers, Virtual Assistant Red (male, 24) and Clara (female, 28), expressed satisfaction with the flexibility afforded by freelance work conditions that allowed them to explore the country and other parts of the world. Clara said it allowed her family to ‘travel with our child in a lot of places while earning sufficiently.’

The imaginary of flexibility also encompassed imaginaries of limitless social mobility and diversity in the nature of work. For example, online freelance writer Karen (female, 26) shared,

> In my previous job, they can throw as much deliverables to you as they can because you signed a fixed contract for a fixed amount of time, and they can even exceed that beyond office hours. In freelancing you can expand your earning as much as you work.

Freelancing work presents multiple possibilities to a worker. In a Freelancer Forum we attended, the speaker/coach advised the workers to explore new work possibilities by “faking one’s skills,” anyway, one can “learn new tasks on the job.”

Interestingly, for some workers, the trope of flexibility attributed to online freelancing stretched to the capacity to flexibly circumvent traditional labor expectations and norms. Karen (female, 26) said that in more traditional jobs,

> You were fighting (with other candidates) over a full-time job or it’s you versus people from the bigger universities, then the employer would be very biased to the graduates of those schools.

In online freelance work, however, she continues, overseas clients did not have the same considerations.

> They may also look if you’re a college graduate or if you study in a university, but it boils down to your skills and your track record. They look if you can do their job, if you have good work ethic, if they can get along with you on a personal level.

The interesting aspect with ‘imaginaries of flexibility’ was that it could be negotiated depending on the specific values to which a worker ascribed importance. And this could be about diversifying the nature of work, expanding one’s earning capacity, designing one’s office space as a leisure space, having more travel opportunities, or spending more time with family.

Despite imaginaries of flexibility, however, many workers also shared the need to work within inflexible and predetermined schedules due to work monitoring systems (for example, *Hubstaff*), and the need to constantly be on the email and provide immediate response to clients. Whereas ‘flexibility’ and mobility have come to be one of the most powerful selling point of digital labor, the professional habitus that workers have created around these ‘always-on networks of communication’ has forged new standards and basis of professionalism that continues to be legitimized by the valorization of various institutions including that of the media and technological brands.[55] This in turn leads to an unspoken yet compulsory need for today’s workers to assume the habit of constantly ‘performing presence’ (10) whereby ‘the office is no longer a place but an idea to be enacted’. The negative affective component of ‘presence bleed’ is also underscored in this form of contemporary work; one that generates anxiety and compels workers to develop an extra sensitive attunement to stay on top of one’s work alongside the ability to anticipate what needs to be done[56]. More specifically, a transcriptionist, Em (female,

31) shares the tension between flexibility and constraint in the nature of her online freelance work:

> Yes, I work fulltime at home. I have something like a bundy clock like that (laughs). Can you imagine? Hubstaff. It’s an app that was given by my boss…. Since I'm putting in 40 hours and it's a must that I complete the 40 hours per week. It’s not like you will get paid even if you don’t work, no that’s not the same for me. But you see you are tied in a way but also *flexible* in a way because you can start like 10am or 1pm as long as you complete the total 8 hours (per day). (emphasis ours)

Together with the above, some of the workers articulated the need to work at cafes or co-working spaces. This clearly contradicted arguments about traffic avoidance or saving money, especially as co-working spaces and cafes were also often located in central business districts of Manila. Interestingly, this was necessary for some workers as physically ‘working-at- home’ was still not fully recognized as a legitimate job for family members. Their laments included relatives thinking that ‘I am lazy’ and asking them to ‘find a serious job’ (Cris, female, 43) to their neighbors interrogating them about ‘how we were able to buy a car, yet we are always just here at home’ (JR, male, 27). This concern about the non-recognition of online work as legitimate work appeared to be important for a number of Filipino online freelance workers as it also constantly emerged as an issue raised during online freelancer events.

The above examples show the value of the imaginary of flexibility as one of the major drivers compelling Filipino middle class workers to embrace online freelance work. Through their classed interpretations of flexibility attached to the nature of digital

freelance work as , we see that digital labor, although understood to be facilitating a precarious form of labor, is actually fulfilling for some in relation to previous work conditions that tied them to past experiences of constraint and control. At the core of this trope of flexibility are the neoliberal ideologies of “individual entrepreneurial initiative” or “individual self-realization”[57] that compel the workers to break free from the controls of traditional corporate institutions and inefficiencies of local institutions to seize multiple unlimited opportunities. However, flexibility remains an imaginary, for as we see from the examples above, digital labor presents its own forms of control and constraint. As Peck[58] has argued, it is important to avoid the dangers of a narrative which “glorifies and naturalizes the contracted-out, ‘free-agent’ economy without regard for the exploitative tendencies of a highly flexible working environment that arise from this economic system.

Conclusion

This chapter sought to provide a grounded account of the realities of the ‘on-demand’ global economy and of ‘platform labor’ in the Global South. In paying particular attention to the experiences of online Filipino freelance workers in one context, we surfaced how locally situated contexts of class and coloniality foreground the imaginaries of digital labor. At the same time, we see the global scale of the digital labor experience and we find that some of these experiences echo findings on digital labor in other parts of the Global South[59] and the Global North[60]. We argued that in order to go beyond oppositional binaries or overly optimistic or pessimistic accounts of these experiences, we need to consider the socio-cultural and economic complexities of the worker environment that might drive the attractiveness of platform labor. As a

framework for understanding this, we conceptualised the entwined imaginaries of class and coloniality. Drawing from in-depth interviews and analysis of multiple texts circulating in online freelance forums, Facebook groups, and ‘freelancer’ events, we identified three such imaginaries: that of ‘distinction,’ ‘transcendence,’ and ‘flexibility’.

The key insight from our data is how Filipino online freelance workers experience digital labor in contradictory ways. We argue that it is important to understand more deeply the classed and colonial imaginaries that frame whether and how these workers embrace platform labor as an appealing work option. While this work hides a horde of conflicts that starkly resemble both old and new manifestations of exploitation and self-exploitation, its connections to the abovementioned notions of distinction, transcendence, and flexibility nevertheless possesses deeply affective dimensions that provide workers a sense of fulfillment.

Seeing online platform labor merely as digital sweatshops tells us only a slice of the real picture of how digital transactions unfold, are lived, experienced, and imagined, particularly in less economically advanced regions. Together with a continued interest in the global dynamics of inequalities that structure this labor, we also need to capture the local articulations of these global work realities and, crucially, the globally inflected but locally rooted meanings that workers ascribe to it. Making sense of all these is a crucial precondition to exploring possibilities for interventions that can improve the conditions of digital workers, both in the Philippines specifically and in the global South more broadly.

One other emerging insight from our data has to do with the role of the digital environment as well as the rise of ‘influencers’ in shaping the enactment and circulation of these imaginaries. We contend that this deserves a more focused study in the future.

Digital labor in the Philippines has surfaced its own micro-celebrities that work—indirectly and directly—in pushing for these imaginaries in blogs, Facebook groups, and physical gatherings. These influencers who have become successful as some of the early takers in the field attempt to cascade imaginaries of success and mobility to their subscribers that also create rosy aspirations for the workers who now have to compete with thousands of new aspirants. Norms and values held by these influencers who are spatially, and gender located, suggest what is appropriate or good digital work. In turn, workers embrace and perform the imaginaries by sharing their own experiences, memes, and playing coach for other freelancers who cannot afford professional coaching. These imaginaries are also reinforced by government in its pronouncements, forums, and efforts to promote digital labor as a viable employment opportunity. Unfortunately, such allows government to elide its responsibility of addressing the many underlying labor and infrastructure issues that make digital labor, with all its imperfections, to become palatable.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The chapter is an output of the Newton Tech4Dev Network, funded by the British Council. We thank the online freelancers interviewed for this study as well as the members of the network for the comments and suggestions during the preliminary presentation of findings.

NOTES

[1] The chapter is an output of the Newton Tech4Dev Network, funded by the British Council. We thank the online freelancers interviewed for this study as well as the members of the network for the comments and suggestions during the preliminary presentation of findings.

[2] Mark Graham, “Digital Labor and Development,” *Oxford Internet Institute* (October 22, 2014). Accessed 1 January 2018, https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/blog/digital-labour-and-development/; Alex Wood, Mark Graham, Vili Lehdonvirta, Helena Barnard, and Isis Hjorth, “*Virtual Production Networks: Fixing Commodification and Disembeddedness,”* The Internet, Policy, and Politics Conferences (2016): 1-33.

[3] Anna Charmaine Abara and Yoon Heo. “Resilience and Recovery: The Philippine IT-BPO Industry During the Global Crisis.” *International Area Studies Review* 16, no. 2 (2013): 160-183 doi:10.1177/2233865913493282; Emmanuel David. “Purple Collar Labor: Transgender Workers and Queer Value at Global Call Centers in the Philippines.” *Gender & Society* 29 no. 2 (2015): 169-194; Alinaya Fabros. *Outsourceable Selves: An Ethnography of Call Center Work in a Global Economy of Signs and Selves* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2016).

[4] See for example, Antonio Casilli. “Is There a Global Digital Labor Culture? Marginalization of Work. Global Inequalities, and Coloniality.” *Second symposium of the Project for Advanced Research in Global Communication*, (2016): 1-42. Accessed January 15, 2018, https://hal-mines-paristech.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01387649v1; Alex Wood, et.al., *Virtual Production Networks*; Mark Graham, Isis Hjorth and Vili Lehdonvirta. “Digital Labour and Development: Impacts of Global Digital Labour Platforms and the Gig Economy on Worker Livelihoods.” *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* (2017): *1-28*; Mark Graham, Vili Lehdonvirta, Alex Wood, Helena Barnard, Isis Hjorth and D.P. Simon, *“The Risks and Rewards of Online Gig Work at the Global Margins”* (Oxford: Oxford Internet Institute, 2017), accessed February 2, 2018, https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/publications/gigwork.pdf; and Sarah Roberts. “Commercial Content Moderation: Digital Laborer’s Dirty Work,” in *The Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex, Class and Culture Online,* eds. Safiya Umoja Noble and Brendesha Tynes (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2016).

[5] For example, see the works of Melissa Gregg, *Work’s Intimacy* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011); Melissa Gregg. “Presence Bleed: Performing Professionalism Online,” in *Theorizing Cultural Work: Labour, Continuity and Change in the Cultural and Creative Industries,* eds. Mark Banks and Rosalind Gill (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 122-134. See also Niels Van Doorn, “Platform Labor: On the Gendered and Racialized Exploitation of Low-Income Service Work in the ‘On-Demand’ Economy.” *Information, Communication & Society,* 20 no. 6 (2017): 898-914; Lily Irani. “The Cultural Work of Microwork.” *New Media & Society* 17, no. 5 (2013): 720-739. doi:10.1177/1461444813511926.

[6] David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker. “ ‘A Very Complicated Version of Freedom’: Conditions and Experiences of Creative Labour in Three Cultural Industries." *Poetics* 38, no. 1 (2010): 4-20. doi:10.1016/j.poetic.2009.10.001; Helen Kennedy. *Net Work Ethics and Values in Web Design* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

[7] Richard Florida. *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It’s Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2006).

[8] See for example, Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt. "In the Social Factory?: *Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work.*" *Theory, Culture & Society* 25 nos. 7-8 (2008): 1-30; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, ‘*A Very Complicated Version of freedom’*; Christian Fuchs and Sebastian Sevignani. “What is Digital Labour? What is Digital Work? What’s their Difference? And Why Do These Questions Matter for Understanding Social Media?” *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 11, no. 2 (2013): 237-93. doi:10.31269/triplec.v11i2.461.

[9] Alessandro Gandini. *The Reputation Economy: Understanding Knowledge Work in the Digital Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

[10] Gregg, *Presence Bleed: Performing Professionalism Online.*

[11] Hesmondhalgh and Baker. ‘*A Very Complicated Version of Freedom’;* Arvidsson, *The Ethical Economy.*

[12] Adam Arvidsson, Giannino Malossi and Serpica Naro. “Passionate Work? Labour Conditions in the Milan Fashion Industry.” *Journal for Cultural Research* 14, no. 3 (2010): 295-309.

[13] For example, Irani’s study on US based Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) argues that by marketing the nature of microwork platforms as ‘human-as-a-service’, these microworkers are rendered as mere ‘standing reserve’, faceless and dispensable. Irani, *The Cultural Work of Microwork,* 2.

[14] Casilli, *Is There a Global Digital Labor Culture?;* Alex Wood, Mark Graham, Vili Lehdonvirta, et.al., *Virtual Production Networks: Fixing Commodification and Disembeddedness;* Mark Graham, Isis Hjorth and Vili Lehdonvirta, Digital labour and development: *Impacts of Global Digital Labour Platforms and the Gig Economy on Worker Livelihoods*; Mark Graham, Vili Lehdonvirta, Alex Wood, et.al., *The Risks and Rewards of Online Gig Work at the Global Margins;* Sarah Roberts, *Commercial Content Moderation: Digital Laborer’s Dirty Work*.

[15] Niels Beerepoot and Bart Lambregts. “Competition in Online Job Marketplaces: Towards a Global Labour Market for Outsourcing Services?” *Global Networks* 15, no. 2 (2014): 236-55. doi:10.1111/glob.12051

[16] Wood et. al., *Virtual Production Networks*.

[17] ibid.; Graham, et.al., *Digital labour and development;* Graham, et.al., *The Risks and Rewards of Online Gig Work.*

[18] See for example, Ellen Cushing. “Amazon Mechanical Turk: The Digital Sweatshop.” *Utne Reader* (February, 2013). Accessed on 15 December 2017 from http://www.utne.com/science-and-technology/amazon-mechanical-turk-zm0z13jfzlin; Fiona Graham. "Crowdsourcing Work: Labour on Demand or Digital Sweatshop?" *BBC News* (Oct. 21, 2010). Accessed 15 December 2017 from http://www.bbc.com/news/business-11600902; Emiko Jozuka. “As More Work Moves Online, the Threat of 'Digital Sweatshops' Looms.” *Motherboard* (Mar 22, 2016). Accessed 15 December 2017 from https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/qkjk35/as-more-work-moves-online-the-threat-of-digital-sweatshops-looms.

[19] Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot and Kyoko Shinozaki. "Transnational Perspectives on Intersecting Experiences: Gender, Social Class and Generation among Southeast Asian Migrants and Their Families." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43, no. 6 (2017): 867-84. doi:10.1080/1369183x.2016.1274001.

[20] ibid., 871.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Casilli, *Is There a Global Digital Labor Culture*, 31.

[23] Ibid., 139; see also J.K. Gibson-Graham. *The End of Capitalism (as We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

[24] Rossi Braidotti. *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity Press in Association with Blackwell, 2002); Rutvica Andrijasevic. *Migration, Agency and Citizenship in Sex Trafficking* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[25] Noel B. Salazar. “The Power of Imagination in Transnational Mobilities.” *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 18, no.1 (2012): 576-98. doi:10.1080/1070289X.2011.672859

[26] Niels Beerepoot and Emeline Vogelzang. “Service Outsourcing to Smaller Cities in the Philippines: The Formation of a Local Emerging Middle Class,” in *The Local Impact of Globalization in South and Southeast Asia: Offshore Business Process Outsourcing in Services Industries,* eds. Bart Lambregts, Niels Beerepoot and R. C. Kloosterman (London & New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 29-45.

[27] Caroline S. Hau. *Elites and Ilustrados in Philippine Culture* (Quezon City, Philippines: Ateneo De Manila University Press, 2017.

[28] ibid.

[29] Masataka Kimura. "The Emergence Of The Middle Classes And Political Change In The Philippines." *The Developing Economies* 41, no. 2 (2003): 265. doi:10.1111/j.1746-1049.2003.tb00941.x.

[30] ibid.

[31] Kingsley Bolton. “Thank You for Calling: Asian Englishes and ‘Native-like’ Performance in Asian Call Centres,” in *The Routledge Handbook of World Englishes*, eds Andy Kirkpatrick (London: Routledge, 2010): 550-564.

[32] See Nedelyn Magtibay-Ramos, Gemma Esther Estrada and Jesus Felipe. “An Analysis of the Philippine Business Process Outsourcing Industry.” *Asian Development Bank* (2007). Accessed on February 1, 2018 from https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/28359/wp093.pdf; See also Ceferino Rodolfo. “Sustaining Philippine Advantage in Business Process Outsourcing.” *Philippine Institute for Development Studies*, 28 (2005). Accessed on February 1, 2018 from from https://serp-p.pids.gov.ph/serp-p/download.php?d=4101&s=1; Roberts, *Commercial Content Moderation.*

[33] Niels Beerepoot and Mitch Hendriks. "Employability of Offshore Service Sector Workers in the Philippines: Opportunities for Upward Labour Mobility or Dead-end Jobs?" *Work, Employment and Society* 27, no. 5 (2013): 824. doi:10.1177/0950017012469065.

[34] Andrijavesic, *Migration, Agency and Citizenship in Sex Trafficking*, 15-17

[35] Fabros, *Outsourceable Selves*, 13.

[36] Kingsley Bolton. “Thank You for Calling: Asian Englishes and ‘Native-like’ Performance in Asian Call Centres,” in *The Routledge Handbook of World Englishes*, ed. by Andy Kirkpatrick (London: Routledge, 2010): 550-564.

[37] Carlos Luis Santos. “The New Trends in Urban Lifestyle in Manila.” *Research Institute for High-Life* (2013). Accessed February 2, 2018 from www.hilife.or.jp/asia2012/Manila4eng.pdf

[38] Andrijasevic, *Migration, Agency and Citizenship.*

[39] Nicole Constable. *Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Filipina Workers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Rhacel Salazar Parrenas. *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

[40] Jason Vincent Cabañes. “Pinoy Postings: On the Online Cultural Identity Performances of Young Filipino Professionals in Singapore,” in *Changing Media, Changing Societies: Media and the Millennium Development Goals,* ed. by Indrajit Banerjee and S. R. Muppidi (Singapore: Asian Media Information and Communication Centre, 2009): 158-190.

[41] Therese Reyes. “Why Pinoys and BPOs are a good fit”. *Rappler* (April 6, 2016). Accessed on 2 February 2018 from https://www.rappler.com/brandrap/finance-and-industries/124981-filipinos-bpo-good-fit.

[42] Robyn Magalit Rodriguez. *Migrants for Export: How the Philippine State Brokers Labor to the World* (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

[43] See Irani, *The Cultural Work of Microwork,* 18.

[44] Ibid., 12-13.

[45] Former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo’s speech cited in Rodriguez, *Migrants for Export*, ix.

[46] See George Kovacs. “Phenomenology of Work and Self-transcendence.” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 20, no. 3 (1986), 199. doi:10.1007/bf00148299.

[47] David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker. “A Very Complicated Version of Freedom: Conditions and Experiences of Creative Labour in Three Cultural Industries,” *Poetic*s 38, no. 1 (2010): 4-20. doi:10.1016/j.poetic.2009.10.001.

[48] Arvidsson, *The Ethical Economy.*

[49] See Jose Rizal. *On the Indolence of Filipinos* (Madrid: La Solidaridad, 1890); See also Emmanuel de Dios. “Indolence, Incentives, and Institutions,” *The Philippine Review of Economics* 20, no. 2 (2011): 41-78.

[50] For a discussion on rating systems in online labor platforms, see Graham, et.al., *Digital Labour and development*, 150.

[51] Van Doorn, *Platform Labor*, 907-908.

[52] For more on the idea of reputation and capital see Gandini, *The Reputation Economy.*

[53] On the global and cosmopolite Manila middle class life in the late 1990s and early 2000s, see Neferti Xina Tadiar. *Fantasy-Production: Sexual Economies and Other Philippine Consequences for the New World Order* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004).

[54] Anne Kalleberg, "Nonstandard Employment Relations: Part-time, Temporary and Contract Work." *Annual Review Sociology* 26, no. 1 (2000): 341-65. doi:10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.341.

[55] Gregg, *Work’s Intimacy*, 4.

[56] Gregg, *Presence Bleed.*

[57] Gandini, *The Reputation Economy;* Van Doorn, *Platform Labor*, 900.

[58] Jamie Peck. “Struggling with the Creative Class.” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 29, no. 24 (2005): 756.

[59] Jack Qiu. *Working Class Network Society: Communication Technology and The Information Have-Less in Urban China* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009); Mark Graham, et.al., *Digital labour and development: impacts of global digital labour platforms and the gig economy on worker livelihoods.*

[60] Adam Fish and Ramesh Srinivasan. “Digital Labor is the New Killer App.” *New Media and Society* 14, no. 1 (2011), 137-152; Gandini, *The Reputation Economy;* Irani, *The Cultural Work of Microwork.*