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Entrepreneurial Solidarities: Social Media Collectives and Filipino Digital Platform Workers

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Abstract

The article examines the role of social media groups for online freelance workers in the Philippines—digital workers obtaining "gigs" from online labor platforms such as Upwork and Onlinejobs.ph—for social facilitation and collective organizing. The article first problematizes labor marginality in the context of online freelance platform workers situated in the middle of competing narratives of precarity and opportunity. We then examine unique forms of solidarity emerging from social media groups formed by these geographically spread digital workers. Drawing from participant observation in online freelance Facebook groups, as well as interviews and focus groups with 31 online freelance workers located in the cities of Manila, Cebu, and Davao, we found that online Filipino freelancers maintain active social interaction and exchange that can be construed as "entrepreneurial solidarities." These solidarities are characterized by competing discourses of ambiguity, precarity, opportunity, and adaptation that are articulated and visualized through ambient socialities. While we argue that these entrepreneurial solidarities do not reflect a passive and simplistic acceptance of neoliberal discourses about digital labor by digital workers, the solidarities forged in these groups also work to undermine their resistive potential such that these tend to reinforce rather than impose pressure toward critical structural changes that can improve the viability of digital labor conditions.

Keywords

freelance, platform labor, gig economy, collective organization, entrepreneurial solidarities, the Philippines

Currently, some 70 million registered digital workers, mostly in the global South, obtain such "gigs" from online labor platforms and microwork intermediaries (Graham & Anwar, 2019). In Western scholarship, research has shed light on the problematic realities of digital work in general and platform labor in particular. Especially salient for this special issue on marginality is how these extant works have pointed out the precarious position of global South workers in the global digital economy. Many companies in the global North take advantage of the vast and fiercely competitive pool of global South digital workers by doing "labor arbitrage," which involves sourcing the cheapest labor possible (Beerepoot & Lambregts, 2014; Graham et al., 2017; Shapiro, 2017). There is also the "self-exploitation" of digital workers themselves, many of whom are willing and prepared to take the risks of insecure work or accept low pay in hopes of obtaining future advancement (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011, p. 34; see also Arvidsson, 2009). Because of such dynamics, some camps have argued that inequality appears to be "a feature rather than a bug" in platform labor; one that is hinged upon the "subordination of low-income workers" (van Doorn, 2017, pp. 907–908).

Contrasting Western scholarship's generally pessimistic approach, government-funded literature from labor-supplying countries like India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and the Philippines has verged toward being overly optimistic about the new digital economy. They market digital work as a source of income that is not only attractive for individual workers, but that can also act as a catalyst for developing urban centers and rural regions alike. In the Philippines, which is the empirical anchor for this article, the government sees digital work as a geographically flexible alternative to the country's high rate of overseas labor migration as well as a competitive choice for young graduates who do not possess credentials from the country's elite universities (Fabros, 2016). Many digital workers in the Philippines also see their jobs as a highly attractive option, especially in a country

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where employment conditions are fraught with financial stagnation and socioeconomic tensions (Ferraz, 2015). To be sure, their position as relatively cheap labor means that their link to the global digital economy is only "good enough" and is vastly different from their counterparts in places like Silicon Valley (Uy-Tioco, 2019). These digital workers, nevertheless, see their ostensibly "white-collar" jobs as a ticket to middle-classness not only in terms of income, but also in terms of lifestyle (Bolton, 2010; Fabros, 2016). Filipino platform laborers in particular imagine themselves as a cut above other workers. They see themselves as well-positioned to provide skilled global service work, develop their professional selves through the distinct challenges of their jobs, and live a flexible life that circumvents the heavy traffic, bad roads, inefficient public transport, and other infrastructural immobilities in their country (Soriano & Cabañes, 2020).

It is in light of the above that this article contributes to the special issue at hand. We seek to build on works that complicate the easy scholarly ascription of marginality to digital workers in the global South (e.g., Han, 2016; Pal & Buzzanell, 2013). We pay particular attention to the contradictory experiences that platform laborers in the Philippines have in regard to precarization, that is, the process of "increasing insecurity in both subjective and objective respects, which can be identified across modern capitalist economies including in ostensibly privileged strata" (Alberti et al., 2018 p. 449; see also Gill & Pratt, 2008). For this, we draw inspiration from the work of Ronaldo Munck (2013), who forcefully argues for the need to counterbalance the tendency of Western scholarship to confer an aura of newness to the precarity that laborers experience (e.g., Standing, 2011). Munck claims that in the context of the global South, precarity has been the always-already condition of workers. As he puts it,

> While the precariat discourse exudes a nostalgia for something which has passed [the Keynesian/Fordist/welfare state], it does not speak to a South which never experienced welfare state capitalism. The Southern experience of precarity is marked by the nature of the postcolonial state and, later, by the developmental state where this has emerged. (Munck, 2013, p. 752)

Later in this piece, we return to this insight and develop a conceptualization of a more nuanced understanding of the contradictory ways that digital workers in the global South, especially the platform laborers in the Philippines, experience precarity.

This article also complicates the discussion about the kinds of labor solidarity that might emerge in contexts where workers are generally physically disconnected from each other, doing their tasks at home or in some public place (Irani & Silberman, 2013; Wood et al., 2018). We focus on the Facebook groups of Filipino platform laborers as a concrete instantiation of the social media spaces that constitute a central element of the "work world" of such workers. Our aim is to broaden the discussion on labor solidarities beyond the current emphasis on the possibilities of new models for formal unionizing in digital workplaces (Graham & Anwar, 2019; Jaffe, 2019; Wood, 2015). We also consider other forms of worker association that have crystallized in social media, which so often become sites that collapse the boundaries of everyday socialities and political organization (Miller et al., 2016; for examples, see Belair-Gagnon Agur & Frisch, 2016; Liu, 2020).

In sum, this article looks at the complexity of how digital workers in the global South experience precarity and, crucially, the kinds of labor solidarity that might emerge out of the social media spaces that are so central in their work world. We ask: What function do Facebook groups perform for these geographically isolated workers? What possibilities do these social media groups perform for organizing digital workers to advance labor rights and standards?

Drawing from participant observation in online Filipino freelancing Facebook groups, in-depth interviews and focus groups with 31 online freelance workers and "skill-makers" located in the cities of Manila, Cebu, and Davao, we argue that what appears to be emerging are "entrepreneurial solidarities," a concept that we develop throughout the rest of this piece. This concept captures how the social interactions and exchanges among digital workers are characterized by competing discourses of ambiguity, precarity, opportunity, and adaptation. It also underscores that these interactions and exchanges are primarily articulated and visualized through the ambient socialities afforded by social media spaces. In the latter half of this article, we argue that the emergence of such solidarities show that digital workers do not passively and simplistically accept neoliberal discourses about digital labor, what with them helping each other to game a system that they feel games on them as well. We also point out, however, that these solidarities undermine the workers' resistive potential, as they reinforce rather than impose pressure toward critical structural changes that can improve the viability of digital labor conditions.

Ambivalent Marginality, Social Media Affordances, and the Rise of Entrepreneurial Solidarities Among Digital Workers

Digital Labor as an Experience of Ambivalent Marginality

To understand the emergence of entrepreneurial solidarities in the Facebook groups of Filipino online freelancers, it is important to first establish their distinct experience of socioeconomic marginality. As we flesh out in this section, theirs is an ambivalent marginality, borne out of the position that digital labor occupies as an industry in the global South generally but also in the Philippines particularly.

On Marginality in the Global South. Marginality has had a long, if sometimes forgotten, history of being connected with labor conditions in the global South. Its earlier theorizations explored the condition of masses of underemployed Latin American migrants in the 1960s, who appeared to be "beyond the parameters of the capitalist development process" as well as "shut out from the social, economic, political and cultural mechanics of social integration" (Munck, 2013, pp. 748, 750). Meanwhile, current debates about labor often characterize marginality as "precarity". A "class in the making," the *precariat* has been argued to represent seven different dimensions of "labor security" that it lacks, such as stable occupational identity, security of job descriptions and career paths, the safety and regularity of working conditions, the security of income over the life course, and the lack of a collective voice—such as through a labor union—with which to advance claims (Standing, 2011).

Several scholars (Alberti et al., 2018; Munck, 2013; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008; Jørgensen, 2016) have argued about the strengths and limitations of the precarity thesis as an analytical tool for examining the contemporary world of work in Europe and beyond. One of the strong points of critique lies in the concept's premise on the emergence of a new and distinct "labor class" when such conditions appear to be premised solely on "Northern sensibilities" and with Britain as its normative model of economic and political development (Munck, 2013). This point contends that the precarity thesis has become a "colonizing concept in the South," in that it fails to recognize that the type of work described as "precarity" has always been the norm in systems where poverty and exclusion are inherent features (Munck, 2013, p. 751).

Some scholars suggest instead to examine "processes of precarization" (see Alberti et al., 2018; Jørgensen, 2016) that reflect continuing subjective and heterogeneous experiences and perceptions of insecure employment. This can be understood as a mode for rethinking heterogeneous identities and group formations where "precarity becomes a point of departure for creating a common space for social struggles and for producing new political subjectivities" (Jørgensen, 2016, p. 2).

On the Ambivalent Marginality of Filipino Online Freelance Workers. Historical and geopolitical contexts clearly matter in examining people's experiences of marginality (Pal & Buzzanell, 2013), as the politics of marginalization emerges in a "highly variable fashion in relation to the specificity of the milieu" (Han, 2016, p. 340). With this article's focus on the case of platform workers in the Philippines, it is important to attend to the country's local labor landscape and how digital labor fits into this. It is also crucial to highlight that, as mentioned earlier, what has come out of it is online Filipino freelancers whose experience of marginality is one of ambivalence.

Two realities mark the Philippine labor market: the continuing expansion of the large informal economy and the continuing "flexibilization" of work in the narrow organized sector of the economy (Ofreneo, 2013). In this context, what is considered low pay in the Global North (i.e., US$10) already approximates the local daily minimum wage in the Philippines. Thus, despite critiques about poor security and the absence of long-term advancement in many of the digital jobs generated by the increasing "globalization" of business services, they are often viewed as a welcome source of "good jobs" locally. Such jobs are still predominated by business process outsourcing (BPO) work (Abara & Heo, 2013; Errighi et al., 2016). However, their difficult conditions—like the long hours in cramped cubicles, constant night shifts and sleep deprivation, high levels of stress, lack of professional advancement, along with the difficulties of daily commute—have pushed some workers to explore alternatives (Errighi et al., 2016; Fabros, 2016).

A significant number of Filipino professionals, and even those who were once deemed as undesirables under local labor standards, are increasingly found to be migrating to online platform labor. Considered by the Philippine government as a solution to its employment gap, the country now boasts of having some of the highest-earning online freelancers in the world (Graham et al., 2017). Valorized under the guise of creativity and flexibility, platform labor is seen as empowerment for Filipino workers. It provides them with new work opportunities to earn dollars, it gives them entry into the "global workplace," and facilitates a flexible work arrangement that takes away the challenges of daily commute while giving them valuable time with their families at home.

Such optimistic narratives about platform labor are challenged by scholars who point out the pernicious conditions that digital workers face (Arvidsson, 2009; Gandini, 2015, 2016; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Gregg, 2011; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; Irani & Silberman, 2013; van Doorn, 2017). Many of these workers are understood to collectively perform the role of a "standing reserve" for unwanted jobs in high-technology workplaces (Irani & Silberman, 2013, p. 18). Among the major concerns about platform workers in the digital economy relate to issues of isolation, the inability to connect to a "community" for networking activities that could improve their working conditions (Gandini, 2015, p. 198; Graham et al., 2017), and the colonization of personal space as facilitated by the ubiquity of modern communication technologies or what Gregg (2013) has termed "presence bleed" (pp. 123–125, 131). Although these studies do the important work of training their lens on the problematic realities of digital labor, they understandably are unable to sufficiently address how the distinct conditions, histories, and dynamics beyond the global North allow workers to rationalize, negotiate, and even challenge these unfavorable work conditions (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010).

In the Philippines, part of the national government's labor strategy to bring in much-needed foreign currency inflows and as a source of job creation is to tout the mantra of Filipinos being "world class service workers" and "modern heroes." The contradiction at the heart of this valorization is that it

helps drive labor export despite the precariousness associated with such work (Rodriguez, 2010). From foreign domestic labor to call center labor and now to digital platform labor—Filipinos aim for work that matches their distinct traits as the top service workers of the world, exploitative conditions notwithstanding. Platform laborers in particular are now being labeled as the "OFW 2.0": no longer the "Overseas Filipino Worker" but the "Online Freelance Worker." Through digital labor, one still earns dollars and performs as a "global worker," only this time without having to be away from home. Providing a boost to the Philippine economy, this, however, constructs the Filipino as a global commodity and a colonized subject. As the labor primarily comprises off-shored low-skilled occupations being taken up by the country's highly educated and young workforce, platform labor in the Philippines is distinctly ambiguous because of the jobs mismatch that predominate this kind of work, which is often characterized as "low prestige" in the Global North (Bolton, 2010; Kimura, 2003, p. 265; Soriano & Cabañes, 2020).

Another contradiction with platform labor in the Philippines is that many workers perceive it as actually fulfilling, even if it facilitates precarization. This is especially because of relatively worse conditions of their previous work which tied them to experiences of constraint and control: the lack of secure employment opportunities, prolonged work hours, and the growing difficulties of commuting from one's home to the workplace due to worsening traffic conditions. At the core of flexibility are the neoliberal ideologies of "individual entrepreneurial initiative" or "individual self-realization"—middle class aspirations as well—that compel the workers to get around the controls of corporate institutions and the inefficiencies of public institutions (Gandini, 2016; van Doorn, 2017, p. 900). Platform workers ascribe to this aspirational "entrepreneurial culture" (Neff et al., 2005, p. 331) and in turn develop outlooks that prepare them for risk and uncertainty.

Social Media as Sites of Entrepreneurial Solidarities

Alongside the ambivalent marginality of Filipino online freelance workers, a second condition that has enabled the emergence of entrepreneurial solidarities is the affordances of the social media spaces that have become the de facto site of their work-related relationships. As in the case of most digital workers, social media spaces like Facebook groups are what enable them to mitigate the geographic disparity inherent in their occupation. They provide, if only in a limited way, some basis for identity and social formation (see Lehdonvirta, 2016; Wood et al., 2018).

That said, any form of worker association that emerges from social media will find itself entangled with the myriad challenges that digital work poses for collective organization. There is, for instance, the absence of an organizational foundation that would have made it easy to "[identify] exactly who the employer is and [raise] questions as to who is to be bargained with" (Howcroft & Bergvall-Kåreborn, 2019, p. 32). There is also the sense of entrepreneurialism and the autonomy inherent in online freelancing that can blur the freelancers' identity as "workers" versus entrepreneurs with more independent mindsets (Neff et al., 2005; Wood et al., 2018, p. 104).

The local labor scene in the Philippines makes it even more difficult to generate inspiration for collective organization in social media. Although waged workers have the right to self-organize and engage in collective bargaining, the outcomes of such are often weak, with annual actual strike numbers in single digits (Ofreneo, 2013; Serrano & Xhafa, 2016). Although wage workers constituted 53% of the workforce in the Philippines, less than 2% of the waged workforce—and less than 1% of the total workforce—are effectively unionized. Factors contributing to this include "consistently high rates of unemployment and underemployment" as well as "the extent to which the state fails to properly protect workers and unionists from employers' unfair labor practices" (Serrano & Xhafa, 2016).

There is extant scholarship that explores the potential role of social media in fostering resistance, solidarity, and unionizing among digital workers (Bryson et al., 2010; Geelan & Hodder, 2017; Heckscher & McCarthy, 2014; Howcroft & Bergvall-Kåreborn, 2019; Lehdonvirta, 2016). But as the relatively scant literature on platform workers in the global South indicates (Wood et al., 2018), current forms of collective organization among microworkers in Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa have limited potential for meaningful collective action. It is imperative then to explore if there are other ways that digital workers might use social media spaces to express resistance and solidarity, even those that work in dialectical tension with the power of global capitalism. As our data reveal, a key affordance of social media that has contributed to the rise of entrepreneurial solidarities has been its capacity to foster ambient socialities. Although these technologies might not be necessarily conducive to political organization, they can allow digital workers like the Filipino online freelancers to form bonds of solidarity that mitigate their experience of the worst effects of the reality that they are at the base of the global information economy. These include the "ambient awareness" of each other's communications that leads to easier knowledge transfer (Leonardi & Meyer, 2015); the "ambient co-presence" from their peripheral but intense awareness of each other (Madianou, 2016); and the "ambient affiliation" from being able to search each other's online "talk" and affirm shared values (Zappavigna, 2011). Through such social interactions and exchanges facilitated by the connective features of social media, digital workers can enact solidarities with their peers (Keller, 2019), but in ways that reflect their ambivalent marginality. Indeed, these solidarities in social media become characterized by "complex intertwined oppositions—fascination and repulsion, questioning and acceptance—that support the quintessential postcolonial condition of ambivalence" (Pal & Buzzanell, 2013, p. 216).

Method and Context

This study involved "internet-related ethnography" (Postill & Pink, 2012, p. 125) that pertains to "ethnography that engages with internet practices and content directly, but not exclusively," understanding that online activities flow into the offline, and vice versa (Orgad, 2005). It is part of a larger qualitative inquiry examining the conditions of Filipino digital workers in the gig economy.

We conducted one-on-one, face-to-face, and online video interviews with Filipino freelance workers from October 2016 to February 2018. We also recruited participants by attending several freelancer events and through snowballing thereafter. These interviews, which explored the conditions that attracted workers to online freelancing, their everyday work experiences, and on whether and how they feel a sense of belonging with other freelance workers, ranged from 40 min to the longest, which lasted for almost 3 hours. Our observations during these events, as well initial interviews, were important for constructing background information about the online freelancing scene in the country and provided clues on the role of online spaces for online freelancers and which ones to observe.

We then joined seven online Facebook groups dedicated to online Filipino freelancers with the largest membership and conducted online participant observation from January to December 2018, examining themes emerging from everyday discussions and the character of interactions. To help with the online participant observation, we hired graduate research assistants who are online freelancers to better understand the context and content of the discussions.

Further taking off from our initial insights, we conducted a 3-hour focus group discussion with nine online freelancers on 20 March 2018 that helped us understand the meaning that social media spaces have for community building among digital workers. All quoted material are anonymized and translated from a mix of English and Filipino. Interview quotes are in pseudonyms.

Nature of Online Freelancing Facebook Groups

The online freelance Facebook groups we examined orientate around labor platform (e.g., groups dedicated to Upwork workers and aspirants such as *Upwork Philippines*), the nature of the job (e.g., *Virtual Assistants Network Philippines*), regional/geographic location (e.g., *Cebu City freelancers*), client nationality (e.g., *Freelancers with Australian clients*), and those organized around more experienced workers or whom they call as coaches or trainers (e.g., *Online Filipino Freelancers; Freelancers in the Philippines*). Platform and occupational-based groups echo findings from earlier studies (Wood et al., 2018) where workers converge in terms of the labor platforms that they use as well as the jobs that they engage in. These groups naturally attract current and aspiring workers who seek strategies on how to enter the industry or thrive. Some of these Facebook groups contain many posts seeking advice on how to land jobs, as well as "job postings," given that established workers who manage to acquire large projects become whom they call as "agencies," who outsource parcels of their projects to other workers. Other groups carry a wider variety of content and engagement, as we will discuss in the succeeding sections. Strikingly, Facebook groups organized by digital labor "coaches" have the largest subscription.

Most of the groups we followed are explicit in their goal of functioning as spaces of support for workers. For example, Upwork Philippines' "About Us" describes the group's goal of building "a community within Filipino freelancers with the advocacy of helping each other via a Filipino tradition called *bayanihan* where everybody help(s) each other. . . ." Apart from one group that explicitly encouraged more "positive" and "professional" posts, the groups welcomed all kinds of posts that can help fellow freelancers, including rants, as long as these did not harass nor disrespect other workers.

In the following sections, we show how these Facebook groups become spaces that foster entrepreneurial solidarities, as digital workers attempt to discuss strategies and create networks of support to overcome the ambiguities and challenges posed by digital labor platform conditions. We underscore how these social media groups become sites of "ambient awareness" as the workers learn about each other's expressed discontent about their work and construct their labor mitigation strategies (see Leonardi & Meyer, 2015); "ambient co-presence" as the workers build virtual coworking communities of reinforcement and care (see Madianou, 2016); and "ambient affiliation" as the workers find themselves idealizing entrepreneurial values (see Zappavigna, 2011).

Expressing Discontent and Constructing Labor Mitigating Strategies

Skill-Arbitrage and Platform Diversification

Across the Facebook groups, there is a recurring discourse of optimism toward digital labor, with workers celebrating the opportunity and flexibility that online freelancing and labor platforms provide. However, inserted into these optimistic discussions are expressions of discontent about the conditions of platform labor as well as their powerlessness in the platforms. Although many platforms receive a lot of ire from the workers, Upwork appears to be the most infamous. The workers express their frustration about its exploitation of "labor arbitrage," the seasonality of jobs, and increasing competition, saying:

> I hate you Upwork . . . You keep increasing your rates and you are taking a significant cut from our hard earned money!!! I hope that one day a better and more popular platform would emerge and replace you that is not as greedy and unfair!

They also share their horror stories of what they consider as "unfair account suspensions" rooted in the same exploitative ethos: "They . . . suspended my account without giving due explanation on why they did so. I appealed with them on how to lift the suspension and submitted documents but to no avail!"

Some of the workers would suggest that they leave Upwork and consider alternatives. Emblematic of this is one of them sharing the article, "Upwork alternatives: 32 best freelance websites in 2017." The more senior members of the group offer a more creative counterpoint to the abusive conditions in the platform. They would advise new entrants about "skill arbitrage," where workers strategize about choosing jobs and platforms that can give them a better advantage (see Beerepoot & Lambregts, 2014), as well as "platform diversification," which pertains to opening accounts across different platforms and maintaining as many networks and connections as possible within but also outside these platforms.

This observation contrasts with accounts presented in the literature casting the experience of online freelancers as "digital sweatshops," with passive workers being victimized by the platform's conditions. While the platforms are indeed oppressive, it is rare for enterprising freelancers to stay in one platform. The common rule is for workers to diversify and expand their network to mitigate the challenges of labor seasonality and labor arbitrage. As one digital labor trainer and social media marketing strategist shared in an interview, ". . . workers accept low rates if they stay only in one platform because they will be dependent on whatever jobs are available there, even when the rates are low."

It is also common for members to share project opportunities, with one group even having a dedicated thread for posting such queries. Given that some workers occasionally take the role of employers who outsource projects to other workers, some of the Facebook groups also function as recruitment spaces. The use of the group for skills arbitrage, platform diversification, and re-outsourcing of projects can suggest a form of collective response to counter the challenging conditions posed by digital labor platform arrangements.

Strategic Pricing and Rate Negotiation

Strategic pricing is also a common source of ambiguity given the digital labor platform design, which requires workers to bid for jobs where the scope of tasks can be vague and rates can be variable. Many "newbie" freelancers share posts such as:

> Hi fellow freelancers, can you help me? I'm not used to negotiating about rates, often I just accept whatever the client says. Below is my rate—is this too high for a VA [virtual assistant]? Help please!

Others would describe the nature of the job or post screenshots of their application, hoping that more experienced freelancers would come in to give advice: "I got a job offer. Transcription job. P500/day 8 hr/day with time tracker. 5–6 days a week. Is this okay?"

In comparison to more structured forms of employment where rates are pre-identified in relation to expected tasks and with institutionalized human resource mechanisms to guide workers, the labor platform design creates ambiguities because rates can vary depending on the nature of the job, client demands, or the worker's portfolio. The issue of rates thus becomes a subject of discussion and debate, with conversations aimed at helping confused workers estimate acceptable rates that would give them some bargaining capacity with potential clients. Other members even create a summary of "average acceptable rates" to guide new entrants. They would also advise workers to avoid accepting very low rates, as "they can be pegged as cheap workers" and may have a hard time increasing their rates in the future.

In some instances, workers would "flag" abusive clients that by reputation ask for below average rates. More experienced workers express concern about how some foreign-based clients offer low rates even when they know that such work should command higher rates, saying, "That client again, avoid that client forever, seriously, what do they think of us?!" Some of the workers would respond by pointing out that these clients attract the "newbie" workers who accept low rates. Workers are not unaware of the nature of business outsourcing and the postcolonial hierarchies this involves. As one worker explains, "essentially it's the same job that they would open up there, but they bring them here because they can hire labor here at a much cheaper rate." Yet, none of the conversations we reviewed from the Facebook groups nor from our interviews had workers critically discuss why such disparity in rates even exist. So while they know that they command rates lower than the West, complaints get raised when the offered rate goes beyond what they consider to be the average or what they think Filipino digital workers deserve, often in relation to competitors from other labor supplying countries. As a female freelance worker who is also an "agent" outsourcing her projects to other workers says:

> As Filipinos, we have to protect our reputation because usually, they compare us to competitors like Indians and Bangladeshis. Sometimes they would say, "your rate is too high, others charge much lower." But I say, 'but the quality of the work may also be lower?

Apparently a deeper issue among Filipino digital workers, a coach lamented during an online freelancer event we attended that Filipinos tend to charge lower rates in comparison to their competitors from other parts of the world, to which many workers in attendance chuckled in agreement. These more experienced workers would advise the group members to demand higher rates while emphasizing that Filipinos are preferred in this industry and nudged the attendees to continually improve their skills to more confidently command higher rates. This can be drawn from how Filipino digital workers 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," situating themselves within a long history of global service workers valorized by the State, such as nurses, domestic workers, or call center agents (Kimura, 2003; Uy-Tioco, 2019).

Reputation Building Through Cultivating Expertise and Relationship Management

Another important threat to the digital workers is the rise of more competition brought about by the increasing popularity of online freelancing. In one of the groups organized by a digital labor coach/trainer, members expressed both pride and concern when the group leader/coach was interviewed on television about the opportunities presented by online freelancing. Amidst praises that it was "good that they are starting to recognize online freelancers, woohoo!," one commenter posted, "I worry that this is going to create problems for us, as if the competition is not yet very tough."

Thus, a common topic of discussion is how to "build a reputation," cultivate "expertise," and "maintain good relationships with clients." In an economy underscored by the proliferation of project-based employment and also a visible evaluation and ranking system, the role played by reputation is crucial for determining one's success (Gandini, 2016, p. 8; Wood et al., 2018). Getting "repeat clients" or obtaining "long-term projects" helps workers mitigate the threats of labor seasonality and increased competition. However, with many of the clients being foreign and without clear guidelines on how to maintain relationships in purely virtual work environments, relationship-building becomes a common topic in these groups. Workers discuss the need to "take care of" and "be a real person to the client," "manage client expectations and egos," "understand what the client means with one short phrase and deliver," know the client's *kiliti* (soft spot), or "manage telling the truth when one can't deliver the task immediately." They also talk about how such work entails significant emotional labor on their part.

The Facebook groups also reveal the paradoxes inherent in the relationship workers have with their clients. Some of the workers would post images of how kind and generous their clients are "Enjoying my family's stay in this hotel which has been fully paid by the client, plus these earrings. I'm so happy!" or "Had a great weekend with my bosses," accompanying a photo of the worker with the foreign client's family in a tourist spot. These kinds of posts would get hundreds of likes and comments of reinforcement, but also expressions of envy, "When would I ever find a client like that?!" or "Please share with us your tips on how to get such a great and generous client!"

Others are not as lucky. Some of the worst examples of client relationships shared include, amongst other things, workers who are scammed by clients, or who work with "difficult" and "abusive" clients. In one thread of a highly subscribed Facebook group, one worker asks, "When does it become reasonable to leave a client?" Such posts are reinforced by memes and jokes about how workers deal with nasty, demanding, or even "naughty" clients. In one group, where a worker labeled a former client negatively, workers debated on whether it was "professional" to post workers' concerns about clients publicly.

It would be notable that these pertain to complex sensemaking and continued rethinking on the part of the workers, especially in the digital labor environment when there are no institutionalized mechanisms for help nor manuals to follow on "how to maintain a job," or "how to deal with foreign clients." The pressing need for workers to navigate these ambiguities appears to conjure a sense of entrepreneurial solidarity emerging from these groups.

In sum, we found that worker expressions of discontent show that workers are not unaware and in fact recognize the challenges and abuses posed by the digital labor platform arrangements. Their discontent in the Facebook groups then become anchor points for exchanging strategies of platform diversification, rate negotiation, and reputation building—one where workers, given the flexible nature of their employment—are reminded to carefully manage their presence on platforms and relationships with their clients to mitigate the challenges posed by platform labor. Through their "ambient awareness" afforded by the discussions in the groups, the workers obtain some knowledge crucial for generating strategies to overcome digital labor's difficulties, which is particularly crucial in the context of ambiguity (see Leonardi & Meyer, 2015). While these expressions of discontent and sharing of strategies can be construed as agentic formations among workers, we also point out that these often conclude in terms of workers moving from one platform or client to another, often with similar or only slightly better work conditions, rather than mobilizing to demand for reforms on platform structures or policies.

Coworking as Virtual Communities of Reinforcement and Care

As attested to by freelancers' remarks during interviews with regard to the social aspect of their work, social media plays a crucial role in providing them with the social support and networking opportunities that their work and personal well-being requires. As digital workers spend a great deal of time interacting, discussing, and socializing within these spaces, there are regular instances of coworkers collaborating with one another to solve issues encountered by members at any time of the day, such as how to work with excel or what is the best software or hardware to use, or where to buy work equipment at best value. In online freelancing groups, freelancers also raise everyday concerns: "Who is still working at this time? We should form a group of midnight Virtual Assistants." In another, an expectant mother randomly posts a photo with a message: "Hello fellow online freelancers, for how many hours have you been working today? I've been

working for 13 hours now. #onlinelife." This post obtained a number of replies from other freelancer-mothers, advising the group member to rest while also sharing their own experience of online freelancing while caring for their children. At random times, workers would share images of their workstations, "Look at my work area. Just happy to be working and being with my kid at home." Another coworker posts, "Co-workers (*mga ka-OFF*), please post photos of your working areas too!"

In these online communities, workers share photos of their work environments, memes on the joys and gripes of online freelance work, display their recent purchase from earnings, recommend effective work processes, seek referrals, and circulate practical techniques for managing the work-at-home environment while "thriving" in the industry. Other key genre includes sharing, through humorous posts, the struggles of finding a quiet work environment for regular client meetings amid the noise of the urban landscape. In contrast to our earlier discussion then of instrumental posts where workers sought or shared specific advice, these posts are random and simply enact a sense of shared experience. This is akin to what Madianou (2016) calls "ambient co-presence," where "peripheral, yet intense awareness of distant others" (p. 198) facilitated by visual, textual, and even emotional posts in ubiquitous media environments "also immerses participants into emotional spaces" of belonging (p. 195).

One of the issues about digital labor is the issue of isolation and need to prove the legitimacy of work to family and friends. The common experience of freelancing emerges as a convergence point in these group conversations. "Yes, sometimes, people think we are doing illegal activities because why are you just in the house but you have TV, gadgets, car, etc." Another worker comments, "Yes, neighbors are even suspecting we might be doing cybercrime at home." Other workers share how glad they are to belong to this online supportive environment where their pride in their work is affirmed amidst friends and family who ask, "don't you have a social life because you are always at home?" In response, workers would chime in to justify their choice of work, "at least we don't have to be stuck in traffic like them! I love my freelance life!"

The online space has a particular value for freelancers who often work from home, mostly in isolation, and therefore functions as a support group for freelancers that help legitimize their work for one another as they find convergence points for identification and belonging.

We also note that while much of our findings focus on Facebook groups, there are alternate spaces where workers converge. Some workers shared in interviews that while Facebook groups help in finding out new trends, updates, and issues concerning the larger Filipino freelance community, some of them find these groups less meaningful, although they continually visit these groups from time to time. Instead, these workers maintain private group conversations with workers involved with the same client or those they encounter

via meet-ups, in private messaging platforms such as Messenger or Viber. In these spaces, they would have sustained and substantial exchanges with workers whom they are more familiar with and likewise share tactics and strategies.

Idealizing Entrepreneurial Values

Finally, the Facebook groups also construct standards of value for online freelancers. They set norms of what counts as "success," what counts as a "good gig," or what constitutes a "good digital worker" or a "good workspace." The groups would regularly feature members (often those who used to be mentees in the coaches' training programs) who have achieved some success through video interviews published via Facebook Live. More experienced freelancers or coaches also engage in the telling of their own "winning stories," where they share their work history and personal stories of success. In one Facebook group, a moderator hosts a Facebook live featuring a popular worker–influencer who has made millions through online freelancing. The video tells the aspirational story of how the guest, without having completed a college degree, has managed to command high rates and sustain a pool of repeat clients, again "while enjoying a good, flexible work-life."

Valorizing the "entrepreneurial spirit," some of the workers recognized as "achievers" in the Facebook groups suggest that the way to go for freelancers is to eventually become "flexible agents" where they can take on multiple large projects that will allow them to maintain control, mitigate sudden problems, and even become "employers" who can hire other freelance workers. Members of these groups were also observed to take on the role of coaches for one another by posting visual images of material acquisitions alongside a description of the hard work that they have put in to achieve their own version of "achievable success," which aspiring freelancers can emulate. Through such content, the groups foster "ambient affiliation" among the workers, allowing them to see and search for content that express their shared values (Zappavigna, 2011).

Conclusion

The relationships portrayed in this study demonstrate the sense of agency possessed by Filipino online freelancers in how they cope and adapt with the precarious condition posed by digital platform labor. For them, Facebook groups are sites for diverse forms of ambient socialities that can mitigate the worst effects of their working conditions and so, at the very least, enable them to manage the ambiguities of their experiences of marginality. This mirrors extant work on affect, in which workers in the face of precarious conditions grow capable of developing innovative new ways to promote solidarity and solve common struggles (Gill & Pratt, 2008). For the ambivalent marginality of online Filipino freelancers, the Facebook groups have important implications for how they

work around the conditions of platform labor. These serve as a support mechanism that justifies their work choices and strategies for thriving despite its difficult conditions, thereby helping pacify their feelings of defeat and marginality.

Second, however, the entrepreneurial solidarities that emerge from the Facebook groups also serve to dampen possibilities to meaningfully challenge the structures of power underlying digital platform labor. As shown in the findings, aspirations of a flexible working environment and "unlimited opportunities" are promoted in local freelancing circles while training workers for "navigating the digital labor space wisely" to succeed. The everyday, personal, and ambient nature of these socialities function to create a sense of virtual coworking and identification with shared experience that also functions to recognize the challenges while simultaneously making palatable their working conditions. In doing so, it is possible, as Peck (2005) has argued, that these groups promote the dangers of a narrative which "glorifies and naturalizes the contracted-out, 'free-agent' economy" (p. 756) with limited possibility for overturning the exploitative tendencies of digital labor platforms. As a site where members find both inspiration and strategy as entrants to and active participants in this industry, Facebook groups essentially function as recruiters for digital platforms.

In sum, Facebook groups serve as spaces for the articulation of discontent and sharing strategies for coping and success, but also generate "entrepreneurial solidarities" rather than enacting substantial pressure upon platforms to address oppressive conditions. Unless reforms are demanded, new entrants or less experienced workers will have to "settle with the crumbs" and be left to face these prevailing conditions. We argue that the historical, economic and cultural circumstances comprising the digital labor environment in the Philippines: prevailing experiences of precarity and labor informality, how digital labor poses a sense of aspirational autonomy from infrastructural challenges, the lack of strong institutionalized labor movements and dwindling membership and appeal of unions, as well as the valorization of BPO work and recognition of Filipinos as distinct global knowledge service workers by the State, help explain the nature of these solidarities. This echoes what we earlier pointed out as neoliberal ideologies of the "individual entrepreneurial initiative" that compel workers to independently manage the controls of corporate institutions and the inefficiencies of public institutions (Gandini, 2016; Neff, 2005; van Doorn, 2017, p. 900). Expected to individually navigate the route to success (or failure) in the neoliberal economy, entrepreneurial solidarities forged in social media help digital workers—competitors in this precarious labor environment—foster a sense of belonging and support to survive the odds of digital labor, with features that depart from traditional models of labor unionizing. In turn, these solidarities may be seen as supportive of the government's vision of promoting Filipinos as "world class workers," thereby reinforcing the narrative and also allowing it to elide its responsibility for addressing deeper structural issues in the local labor economy. On the other, it may perhaps be seen as emerging entry points for facilitating creative interventions that can improve labor conditions.

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