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Navigating creative careers on social media: self-employment and neoliberalism

Katie Carlson

Advisor: Maya Nadkarni

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Undergraduate Thesis in Sociology & Anthropology
Swarthmore College

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Abstract

This thesis describes and analyzes the working conditions of illustrators who work on social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Patreon. Ultimately, it argues that the perceived perks of self-employment that artists publicly discuss on social media are paradoxical because they are limited by the social media platforms on which the artists post. Additionally, the cons of self-employment artists experience, such as burnout, are systemic issues, even though they are framed as personal problems on social media. The various solutions that artists used throughout the course of this project to combat these issues are individual, rather than collective. Finally, it is in the interest of the social media platforms on which the artists post that they believe in paradoxical narratives surrounding self-employment, experience adverse work conditions, and pursue individualistic solutions to those conditions. These four points demonstrate the entrenchment of neoliberal logics in contemporary discourse and illustrate the experience of artistic labor under conditions of neoliberalism. To make these claims, this project draws from interviews and digital ethnographic research conducted on YouTube and Instagram, as well as scholarly works on neoliberalism and work conditions in digital spaces. Self-employment on social media and artistic work on digital platforms remain understudied and emergent topics in the fields of anthropology and sociology and this thesis contributes to both of these areas.

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Introduction

"When I talk about metaphors about, like, my mental health, I often imagine, like, my brain is like an apartment. And I imagine, like, my anxiety is a roommate, I imagine, like, my ADHD is a roommate, I imagine -- And so, like, my little brain apartment is haunted by a content ghost who is basically just -- kind of, like, pops through the walls whenever I'm working on stuff and is like, 'Hey, this would be great content.' And I'm like, 'I just wanna paint without worrying about it being seen by a bunch of people.' And it's like, 'But you could also record it and that would be cool.' And I think that that pressure has, like, put a bit of, like, a -- has kind of damaged my relationship to my work. And so I'm trying to, now, mend that relationship" (Vivienne).

Between 2018 and 2021, I regularly watched YouTube videos uploaded by illustrators, artists, and individuals interested in journaling, which was a hobby of mine at the time. As I watched more videos and learned more about the creators behind them, I began to realize that these self-employed illustrators often spoke not only about aspects of their jobs that they loved, but also things about them that they didn't like. In the excerpt from one of Vivienne's YouTube videos that I've included above, she describes one of these adverse experiences, using the imagery of a "content ghost" to illustrate the pressure she feels to constantly monetize her art and post about it online. At the time, this prompted me to question what working as an artist on social media is like, what other kinds of pressures they face, where those pressures come from, and what the difference is between creating art that would not be posted about online and creating art for the purpose of posting on social media.

These early questions have greatly informed the direction that this thesis has taken and the arguments I will make throughout it. This research project aims to investigate the work of self-employed illustrators who earn money on social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram and how they understand and experience it. Specifically, it focuses on what their work consists of, the perks the artists perceive self-employment to

offer them, the negative aspects of their jobs, and how they respond to and address those negative aspects. To discuss these topics, this project draws from research I conducted on eight artists over the summer of 2022, including interviews, YouTube videos, Instagram posts, and other online material about those artists that I found online, such as podcasts, previously recorded interviews, and artists' websites.

Ultimately, this thesis argues four main points. The first is that artists' perceived perks of self-employment are paradoxical because social media platforms significantly affect their art and their work. Secondly, I will argue that social media discourse frames negative aspects of these artists' jobs, including burnout, alienation, and precarity, as personal problems while they are in fact systemic issues. I will draw from scholarship on neoliberalism as an ideology and system that affects artists' material realities to support both of these points. Finally, I will claim that the various solutions to the negative parts of their work that artists shared throughout the course of my research are individualistic, rather than collective. Lastly, it is in the interests of the social media platforms on which the artists post, like YouTube and Patreon, that these artists believe in those perceived perks, experience adverse work conditions, and implement individualistic solutions to address those conditions.

Key Terms

Before moving forward with a brief literature review, I will define a few key terms that will be used frequently throughout the thesis and are central to its arguments.

- Artist: a person who uses both traditional art materials (such as paint) and digital art materials (such as the application Procreate on an iPad) to draw visual art pieces and

create products from them (such as prints and stickers). Also one who posts "studio vlogs" on YouTube and sells items in an online shop.

- Content: a piece of information whose purpose is to be posted online, such as a YouTube video or an Instagram post.
- Content creator: one who posts content online, often for their job.
- YouTube: a website that allows users to upload and view long-form video content ranging from a few seconds to hours.
 - YouTube channel: an account held on the YouTube website through which one can upload videos. A main channel is one which the artist uses to post about their work (as opposed to, for example, a channel that only consists of podcasts).
 - Youtube Premiere: a live streaming option video creators can choose when they first upload a video, which allows them and their viewers to watch the video synchronously and participate in a live chat together as it plays.
 - YouTube Short: a type of content much like an Instagram Reel (see below).
 - Viewer: one who watches a YouTube video.
 - Subscriber: one who elects to be notified when a YouTube creator's videos are uploaded.
 - Studio vlog: a genre of YouTube video usually about running a one-person business which often involves product design and/or "packing orders," or preparing physical products to be mailed to customers.
- Instagram: a website that allows users to upload and view content such as posts, Stories, and Reels. A main Instagram account is one which the artist uses to post about their work (as opposed to, for example, an account that only consists of pet photos).

- Instagram post: an image or photo with or without a caption published on one's Instagram account.
- Instagram Story: an image, photo, short video, or other type of content published on one's Instagram account that is automatically deleted after 24 hours.
- Instagram Reel: a video up to 60 seconds long uploaded to one's Instagram account.
- Follower: one who elects to be notified when an Instagram creator's posts, Stories, or Reels are uploaded.
- Patreon: a website that allows users to offer or purchase rewards in exchange for monthly fees.
 - Patreon reward: benefits exchanged for a monthly fee from a Patreon account such as behind the scenes information, physical products, videos, podcasts, and more.
 - Patron: one who pays a monthly fee for rewards from a Patreon account.
 - Patreon tier: Patreon rewards are offered to Patrons depending on how much they pay per month. Different tiers cost different amounts and offer different rewards.
- Admin work: a term used by artists to describe work they do that takes place on computers, such as emails.
- Online shop: online marketplaces where artists sell physical or digital products intermittently (not an actual "store").
 - Shop update: offering new products on or re-opening an online shop (making it public again; when closed, shops do not list any physical products and sometimes no products at all).

For more information on each of these terms, refer to Chapter 1.

A note on the literature: work, play, and hobbies

Throughout Chapters 2, 3, and 4 of this thesis, I will regularly reference scholarship related to neoliberalism as both an ideology and a system that impacts the material realities of self-employed artists. While these sources, including Jaffe's *Work Won't Love You Back* and Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, among others, are the main sources that I will be drawing from, I feel it is important to acknowledge another related field of scholarship that this thesis aims to converse with: digital labor (that is, labor that takes place online). Additionally, I would like to acknowledge that while I aimed to predominantly consult scholarly works written by anthropologists and sociologists, the fact remains that online labor, especially on social media, is an emerging topic of study in these fields. Because of this, I will also reference some literature written in the areas of communication and media studies.

Scholars of labor that takes place online have discussed topics such as the boundaries between work and play, the difference between work and hobbies, and the unpaid labor of fans, users, and others. While I do not address these three areas specifically in this thesis, I do draw from three main questions generated by this area of scholarship. These questions include what work is online, who profits from online labor, and how those who work online conceptualize their freedom. Additionally, this thesis offers a contribution to the conversations in this area because of its focus on artists who are self-employed; both artists and self-employed individuals who work online are understudied in this field.¹

¹ While it may seem that literature about the gig economy is relevant to this research project, it is not included in this literature review because it does not reflect what most of the artists in this thesis spend their time working on. While some take on client work, the bulk of their work consists of regularly uploading content on social media and developing artistic products, which contrasts the short-term contracts that define jobs in the gig economy.

As Scholz writes, "it is impossible to differentiate cleanly between nonproductive leisure activity existing within the sphere of play and productive activity existing within the field of the workplace" in online spaces (Scholz 2012 2). Hjorth provides a clear example of one such activity. She references T.L. Taylor's work on professional ESports players and the "commercialization and professionalization of leisure" to argue that "practices in and around labour and leisure need redefinition" (Hjorth 2018 4). Fuchs and Sevignani build on this point, arguing that online activity in general defies traditional categorization. "Online activity creates content, social networks and relations, location data, browsing data, data about likes and preferences, etc. This online activity is fun and work at the same time – play labour" (Fuchs and Sevignani 2013 1). For artists whose income is attached to posts that they create on social media, even though those posts might be about their cat's birthday or a trip to the farmer's market rather than a new product announcement or an advertisement for one of their other social media pages, the boundaries between the concepts of work and leisure or play also break down. In Chapter 3, I will add to this discussion about what working online consists of for self-employed artists by arguing that the monetization of not only artists' creative passions, but also themselves through the production of social media posts about leisure activities, hobbies, cooking, fashion, etc. results in self-estrangement, or alienation.

The collapse of the so-called dichotomy between work and leisure or labor and play involves a discussion of freedom and exploitation, as other scholars point out. For example, Hjorth refers to Kücklich's work on gameplay and moderation, writing that "much of the social, creative and emotional labour of amateur players around computer modding of games – from which the games companies profit – is done for free. He calls this ambivalently exploiting (and yet for some empowering) practice playbour" (Hjorth 2018 4). In this research project, I

regularly return to the question of who profits from artists believing in certain narratives around self-employment (Chapter 2) and artists experiencing adverse work conditions (Chapter 3). I argue that it is the social media platforms on which they post that benefit.

In contrast to Kücklich, Hector Postigo emphasizes the moment when free labor, in the form of a hobby, becomes monetarily compensated. He writes, "a prevailing question among scholars who study hobby culture and its relation to consumer culture and capital has been: When does a hobby become work?" (Postigo 2016 343). He later describes how video game "commentators sometimes say that once you are paid for it, the hobby no longer is a hobby" and concludes that once "the hobbyist becomes dependent on the pay or responsible to an employer, the 'freeness' of the hobby is lost" (Postigo 2016 343). Holding these two works together, it is paradoxical that when one's unpaid and therefore exploited labor becomes paid for, the labor or activity no longer feels freely given. Significantly, the artists I interviewed actively seek payment for their labor online and rely on the revenue generated by their creation of art and social media posts. This differentiates them from the hobbyists Postigo references. However, his point about the meaning of freedom remains relevant. As I will argue in Chapters 3 especially, artists' ideas about self-employment offering them various freedoms obscures the ways in which their labor is in fact shaped by the social media platforms on which they post and the larger economic system in which they work.

Scholars engaging in conversations about work online have also focused on the labor of fans (Scholz 2012), Chinese "gold farmers" (Tai and Hu 2018), and users whose data is sold by large corporations such as YouTube (Andrejevic 2009). Again, a key difference between these studies and this one is that the artists in this thesis are dedicatedly and publicly pursuing a career on and using social media platforms. They do not inhabit the same positionality as the fans who

support creators such as themselves, and they also do not inhabit the same positionality as the gold miners whose material "ghost work" lies behind the scenes. This thesis attempts to address the need for discussion about self-employed individuals on the Internet within this area of scholarship.

In this section, I have shown that literature about digital labor has focused on topics such as work and play, work and hobbies, and uncompensated labor. Significantly, this scholarship brings up three questions that are central to this thesis. These are what is work that takes place online, who profits from that work, and how do workers understand their freedom. Ultimately, I argue that my thesis offers a contribution to this scholarly conversation about labor on the Internet because of its focus on artists and full-time self-employment.

Methods

I conducted research for this project in the summer of 2022. The two methods I chose to use were digital ethnography and interviews. I focused my research on eight artists and interviewed two of them, one over Zoom and one over email. The artists followed for this research were chosen because they had posted a YouTube video titled "studio vlog" or "small artist vlog" in the past six months and were selling visual art, broadly defined, through an online platform or website. Additionally, I took fieldnotes on over 1500 Instagram posts and Stories these artists created over the months of June and July, as well as approximately 40 YouTube videos they posted over the same months. I also gathered information about these artists and their work from older YouTube videos, YouTube Premiere chats, public interviews, YouTube Shorts, collaborative podcasts, and their websites, shops, online portfolios, and Patreon pages. All of the names in this thesis are pseudonyms and other identifiable information about artists' products and the companies they work with has either been omitted or changed.

Digital Ethnographic Research

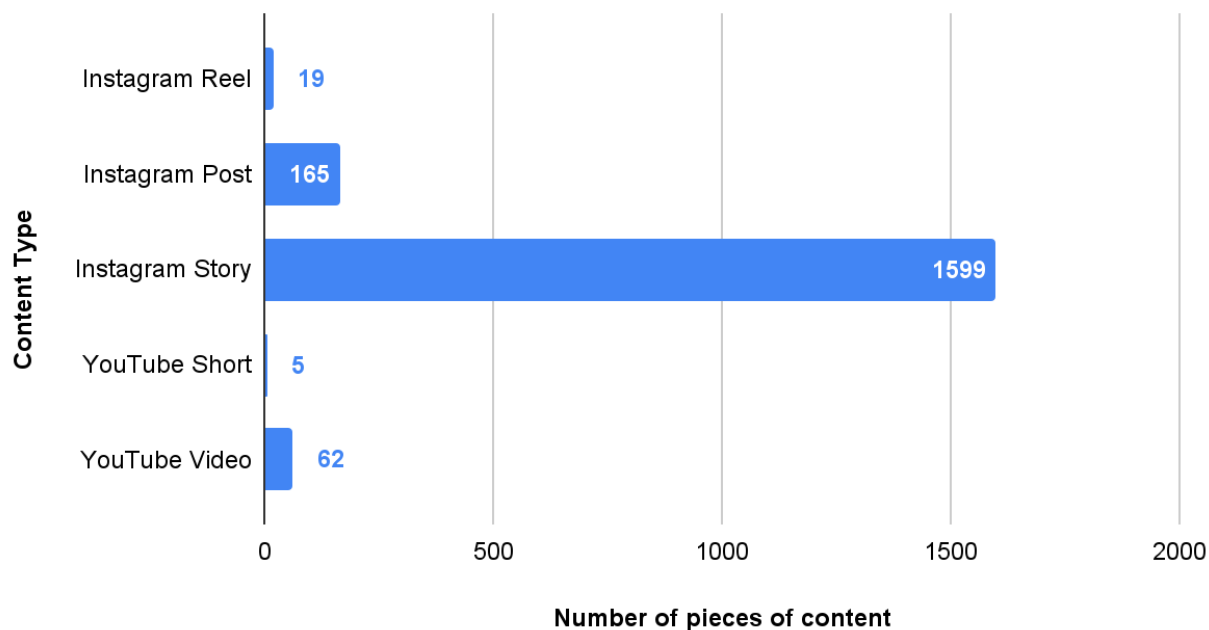


Figure 0.1 Graph showing the types of content artists uploaded between June and July 2022 that I took fieldnotes on. I primarily documented Instagram Stories, YouTube videos, and Instagram posts.

Aside from the interviews, I categorized the rest of the research I conducted as digital ethnography. Specifically, on YouTube, my digital ethnographic research consisted of watching and taking notes on YouTube videos, YouTube Premieres, comments sections, and channel information such as the number of subscribers. On Instagram, this research consisted of viewing and taking notes on posts, Stories, Reels, comments sections, and account information such as the number of followers (Figure 0.1). I am labeling these observations on YouTube and Instagram as digital ethnographic research because my goal for this part of the methodology was to become immersed in the work of the artists. In this case, digital immersion consisted of exploring as much public information about the artists and their jobs as possible during the summer of 2022.

Digital ethnography, as I define it, is a methodology that draws from anthropological ethnography and emphasizes in-depth engagement with people or content that takes place or exists online.² This definition reflects other researchers' definitions of this methodology. Pink et al. draw from O'Reilly's definition of ethnography when defining digital ethnography, which is an "iterative-inductive research (that evolves in design through the study), drawing on a family of methods...that acknowledges the role of theory as well as the researcher's own role and that views humans as part object/part subject." They go on to point out that "once ethnography becomes digital, parts of O'Reilly's definition become conditional on our acknowledgement of how digital media become part of an ethnography...what it might actually mean to be digitally engaged...and where we might want to do more than 'producing a richly written account that respects the irreducibility of human experience'" (Pink et al. 2016 3). Their exploration of the term digital ethnography acknowledges the messiness and ambiguity of it while simultaneously emphasizing how conducting research online has differences from conducting research in person (for example, digital ethnographic work often involves mediated connection with others instead of direct contact).

On each of the social media platforms, I practiced a mode of ethnographic research specific to social media called "lurking." In other words, I did not explicitly interact (by commenting or chatting) with any human subjects. As Waldron writes, this term usually refers to "persons who read messages on online discussion boards but do not contribute to them." She cites Hine to explain that in a research setting and role, "lurker" can be used to describe "hidden participant observers over the course of cyber ethnographic fieldwork" (Waldron 2013). I did not include interaction with human subjects as part of my methodology because I am not focused on

² Importantly, digital ethnography is also about digital objects. Some of the digital objects I encountered in my research included pieces of social media content and artistic products such as phone wallpaper designs. This thesis draws from digital objects to discuss artists' experiences with self-employment.

how followers/viewers interact with each other on the artists' pages or how artists interact with their viewers as a primary part of this project.

I chose to conduct digital ethnographic research for this project because it allowed me to be exposed to as much public work-related/artistic content as possible. Because artists' maintenance of an online presence is an important part of their work, and their work is the central focus of this project, it was important to view and learn as much as I could about the work that they do that takes place in digital spaces and about the digital spaces themselves. Additionally, the interviews I conducted in particular helped me question and learn more about individual artists' perspectives surrounding their work. As Driscoll and Gregg write, "the core reason for doing ethnography in the first place" is this: "Because online culture is not partial we must participate as fully as possible in order to understand it" (Driscoll and Gregg 2010 16). This reflects my motivations for choosing the combination of methodologies that I did.

Several researchers have used interviews and/or digital ethnographic/participant observation research on YouTube. For example, Waldron conducted cyber ethnographic research, "blending the online ethnographic technique of participant interview with hidden participant observer." In this case, hidden participant observation meant observing forum postings, chat room conversations, and YouTube videos without participating in them, as I also did. Waldron also conducted interviews over Skype, forums, chats, vlogs, blogs, and email (Waldron 2013). In another example, part of Lange's methodology included interviewing over 150 people who "engaged at various levels with video making and/or YouTube" and analyzing hundreds of YouTube videos (Lange 2019). Finally, Miller conducted "over 60 hours of trans YouTube observation," which included watching hundreds of videos and noting information about their

content and the channel to which they were posted (e.g. subscriber count). Miller also conducted interviews with six trans YouTubers over Skype (Miller 2019).

In the analysis of my data, I primarily draw from YouTube videos and interviews. While other digital ethnographic data, such as Instagram posts, is also occasionally directly drawn from, the bulk of it serves as context for the claims in this thesis; I could not draw from every relevant example. The videos and interviews were chosen and grouped by theme and/or common vocabulary. Significantly, several of the terms and concepts used throughout the analysis were used by the artists themselves.³ While interviews and YouTube videos have different audiences and the content contained within them may radically differ because of that, I do draw from both assuming that the information the artists are sharing accurately reflects their beliefs.

All of the figures included in this thesis were created by me using publicly available information from YouTube, Instagram, and Patreon. Specifically, I gathered this data from the "about" sections of YouTube channels and Instagram accounts, YouTube videos, Patreon pages, and Patreon tiers. I did not pay any fees to access the information included in the figures or in this thesis on Patreon or any of the other sources.

Finally, I will make a note about my positionality. I am not an illustrator or artist, I am not self-employed, and I do not post regularly on any social media platform. I have never made a YouTube video, created a Patreon account, or opened an online shop. I do, however, identify as a viewer, follower, and subscriber of several of the artists I followed. This informs the way in which I approach analyzing their content; I see it through a long-term viewer's perspective.

Additionally, I am a white woman in her 20s, and all of the participants in this research also

³ In other words, the artists in this thesis are theorists of their own worlds, and I draw from their concept work, or "the active labor of conceptualizing the stuff of the world that ethnographers constantly engage in," in this project (Sunder Rajan 2021 18). Significantly, the fact that this is an emerging mode of labor and field of study emphasizes the importance of their own theorization.

identified as women. They are of varying racial and ethnic backgrounds and range in age (20s-30s). While race and gender are not dimensions of this topic that are explored in depth in this thesis, it is still important to acknowledge what I as the researcher have in common and do not have in common with the research participants.

Chapter Overviews

Chapter 1 provides background information that contextualizes the analyses presented in Chapters 2, 3, and 4. Specifically, it explores what the artists in this thesis do for their work. First, I define the term "Internet art person," which is a term that Vivienne used to describe herself. Then, I discuss the platforms YouTube, Instagram, and Patreon, including what they are, how artists use them, how artists profit from them, and what limitations and affordances they offer. Finally, I explain how artists interact with each other on these platforms.

Chapter 2 dives into how artists describe self-employment online and through interviews and what kinds of benefits they believe come from self-employment. In particular, I discuss the ideas that self-employment offers control, freedom, independence, happiness, and opportunities to be creative. Then, I argue that these narratives about self-employment are paradoxical because the social media platforms on which the artists post affect their art and work. Throughout this chapter, I also show how these ideas are spread and reflect neoliberal ideology. Finally, I explain how social media platforms benefit from artists believing narratives about the benefits of self-employment.

Chapter 3 serves as a counterpart to Chapter 2; instead of covering perceived benefits of self-employment, it focuses on the negative aspects of self-employment, including burnout, alienation, and precarity. In this chapter, I argue that these issues are framed as personal problems online, when they are actually systemic. I again refer to neoliberalism and neoliberal

ideology to make this point and argue that social media platforms benefit from artists experiencing these work conditions.

Chapter 4 turns to how artists respond to these negative aspects of their jobs and what kinds of solutions they have proposed and implemented. I especially focus on artists' attempts to change their work obligations and schedule, change or establish boundaries between work and non-work, practice self-care, and hire assistants. At the end of the chapter, I also discuss how artists connect with each other over these issues. Throughout, I argue that the solutions discussed in this chapter do not involve collective action and therefore reflect the idea that issues with work are an individual responsibility, which is a neoliberal logic. Ultimately, social media platforms also profit from artists attempting to solve negative aspects of their work on their own.

Chapter 1: What is it like to work as an artist on social media?

The YouTube video begins with a blue screen. A circle in the center widens to show an artist sitting in her art studio. "Hello everyone, and welcome to my channel!"⁴ If you are new here, my name is Claire and I am a freelance illustrator. Today is Monday, and I just finished doing some admin work on my computer. I ordered all of the plushies for the next shop update, which I think is going to be at the end of the next month, and I'm really excited about them." She holds up one of the plushies for the camera. "This is what they look like, and I love how they turned out. Since I got that out of the way, I'm now going to paint for a while! In the last video, I was working on this painting of these flowers, so I'm going to keep going on that and I'll catch up with you guys after." Claire paints for several minutes with calming background music. "Hello again! So, I think I've finished the painting, and I'm so happy with how it's turned out." Several clips showing the painting from different angles are shown as she is speaking. "I also got this package in the mail, and I think it's the stickers for this month's Patreon rewards!" The video shows Claire's hands opening the box and taking out an example sticker. "Before I finish up work for the day, I think I'm going to pack a few orders from the last shop update I had and maybe start sketching next month's Patreon art print on my iPad. We'll see! Thanks so much for watching this video, and I'll see you next time! Bye!"

This is a brief example of how an artist who works on social media platforms and maintains an online shop and Patreon account presents a day in her life to her viewers on YouTube. I have written it as a transcript of a YouTube studio vlog, a popular genre of video blog about working as an artist. While this example is a composite of the many studio vlogs available on YouTube, the activities it describes are representative of what the artists in this thesis might present to their viewers as part of their work. In this chapter, I will explain the ins and outs of these artists' work that have been introduced here, including key terms, the social media platforms the artists most commonly use, and the work practices they regularly engage in. The first section focuses on an overview of the artists themselves. Then, artists' work activities on YouTube, Instagram, and Patreon in particular will be discussed. Finally, the last section outlines peer interactions that take place between the artists. On the whole, this chapter is dedicated to

⁴ See the "Key Terms" section of the Introduction for quick definitions of "YouTube channel" and other vocabulary used throughout this chapter.

providing background information about the artists and their work that will contextualize the arguments outlined in Chapters 2, 3, and 4.

"Internet art people"

As Vivienne said in her interview, "I don't describe myself as a content creator. I say that I'm like an Internet art person in that I make art on the Internet" (Vivienne). Throughout my research in the summer of 2022, I heard other "Internet art people" describe themselves similarly. Amy described herself as "a small business owner, freelance illustrator, and I also do social media" (Amy). Lauren simply explained that she was a "full time freelance illustrator" in a YouTube video (Lauren). In each of these self-descriptions, the artists prioritize their ties to art over their ties to social media and the content (video, images, and other media whose purpose is to be posted online) that they upload on social media platforms. However, each of these artists nevertheless regularly create and post content on social media to support their illustration and small business practices.⁵

The primary work-related activities that each of the eight artists I followed for this research engage in are as follows:

- Regularly (multiple times a year and usually more often than that) post videos on YouTube, a website that hosts long-form video content. Some common video formats include studio vlogs, videos in which artists answer questions from their Instagram followers or YouTube subscribers, travel vlogs, videos with advice for other artists or small business owners, and painting videos.

⁵ This is somewhat reminiscent of how art dealers try to deny or minimize their tie to capitalist art markets. "Contemporary art dealers maintain that they aspire to distribute art for history, not for the market" and use words such as "experimentation" and idea generation to describe what their galleries can provide (Velthuis 2005 21).

- Run an online shop with digital downloads and/or physical materials for purchase such as stickers, art prints, etc.
- Regularly (multiple times a year or even daily) post content such as images or short video clips on Instagram, a social media platform that had primarily hosted image-based content and now also hosts short video content. These images and videos commonly depict sketches/sketchbooks, finished illustrations, and Patreon rewards.

Some artists also produce content for other social media platforms, such as Twitch, upload podcast episodes (30-60+ minute videos of at least two people discussing a given topic) to YouTube, participate in in-person art conventions or art markets by selling physical products at a booth or table, run a Patreon account, and/or take on artistic commissions for clients/brands.

Amy introduced herself in one of her YouTube videos by listing many of these work obligations.

"I'm an illustrator except I do a lot of like social media stuff as well like make studio vlogs or YouTube videos. I'm on Instagram and TikTok and all those, like, different platforms as well...I run a small business, and I currently am selling a lot of like stickers, keychains, washi tape - those type of things - but I'm slowly expanding into making like plushies and pouches and more, like, I guess lifestyle type of products...I also really enjoy taking on certain types of client work here and there or just like working on personal projects like painting...I feel like I juggle a lot of different roles" (Amy).

"Role-juggling" is a key characteristic of the work that the artists in this thesis do online. This is because it allows them to have multiple revenue streams that are not dependent on one specific platform's funding structure or algorithm that uplift creators' work at different rates.⁶ While it is important to acknowledge the variety of competing work obligations that these artists take on, this project specifically focuses on the work that they do on YouTube, Instagram, and Patreon

⁶ "The algorithm" is a variety of processes that determine what to show to someone on their social media account. For example, Instagram draws from information about posts, posters, viewers' activity, and viewers' history of interaction with others to make predictions about how likely viewers are to interact with posts. If they are highly likely to interact with a post, it will be placed so that they will be more likely to see it and therefore interact with it (Mosseri 2021). This ranking structure can impact how much interaction artists receive with their posts and, by extension, their work and products for sale.

because they regularly produce a significant amount of content for all of these platforms and developing that content comprises a large portion of their work.

YouTube

The Week described YouTube as "the true successor to TV" (Alang 2020). Similar to TV, YouTube provides video-based content. However, it differs in that it is a website on which one can upload, view, and comment on those videos. There are several types of content available on YouTube, but the one I documented artists using the most throughout my research was the standard long-form YouTube video format, often 15-50 minutes long. Many of these videos were studio vlogs, a particular genre of YouTube video that the artists often posted in which they would document tasks involved with running a one-person business, such as product design and/or preparing physical products to be mailed to customers (Figure 1.1). I also occasionally documented artists uploading videos to their YouTube channels (or YouTube accounts) as Premieres and Shorts. A Premiere is a live streaming option offered to YouTube video creators when they first upload a video. If they choose to upload it as a Premiere, they and their viewers can watch the new video synchronously and participate in a live chat together throughout the video. This relatively new feature was launched in 2018 (YouTube 2018)). A Short is a multi-second video that shares similarities to Instagram Reels and TikToks; all three of these forms of content are videos usually only a few seconds long. Launched in 2020, this is an even newer feature offered on the platform (Sherman 2021). All of the artists followed for this research project uploaded videos to YouTube multiple times per year, if not most weeks, for multiple years.

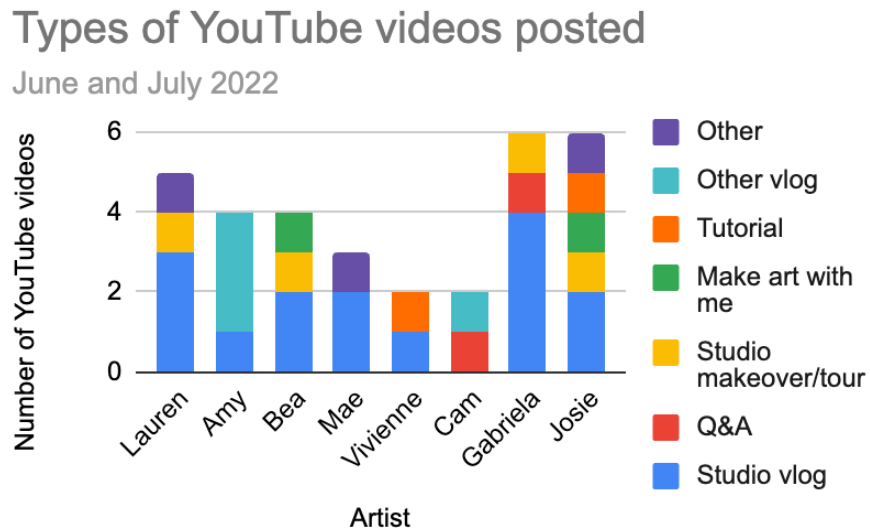


Figure 1.1 Bar graph showing the types of YouTube videos artists posted on their main channels between June and July 2022. The most popular type of YouTube video was studio vlog, followed by studio makeover/tour. Source: YouTube.

There are a few different ways to earn money as an artist who posts videos on YouTube. One of these ways is enrolling in the YouTube Partner Program (YPP). According to the YouTube website, the YouTube Partner Program "gives creators greater access to YouTube resources and monetization features." It enables creators to earn money from ads played before, after, or during their videos, as well as through other features like channel memberships (Google, n.d.). Importantly, ad revenue is dependent on the number of times one's videos are clicked on (this is also called the number of "views"). Therefore, it is also dependent on the frequency at which creators post (Figure 1.2). The more often they post, the more views and chances for views they have.

Number of YouTube videos posted

June and July 2022

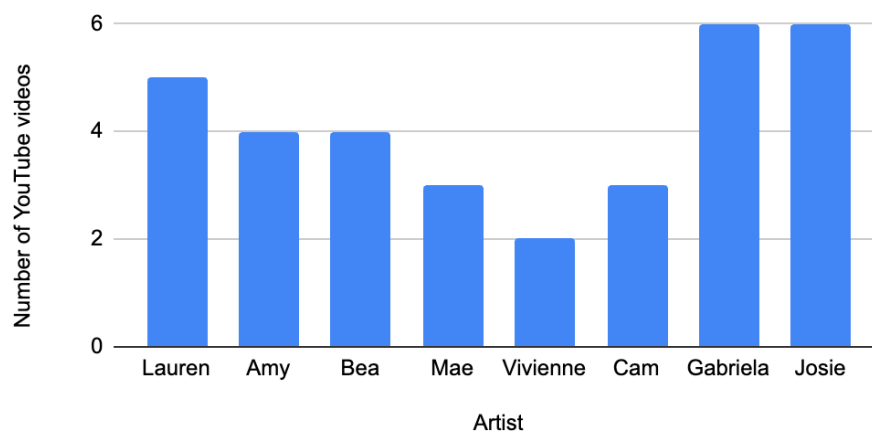


Figure 1.2 Graph showing the number of YouTube videos artists posted on their main channels between June and July 2022. Most of the artists posted between four and six videos. Source: YouTube.

Another option is to post sponsored videos, which all but two of the artists did throughout the course of this research. A sponsored video is a video in which an artist shares a product with their viewers and the company behind that product pays the artist for advertising it on their channel. These artists often thanked the sponsoring company for sponsoring their video at the beginning of the video, mentioned the name of the company and showed that name visually in the video, and spoke more in-depth about the company and the services or goods it offered at the end of the video. Sponsorships require agreements with companies not only over how much artists are paid for positively speaking about and advertising that company to their YouTube viewers and subscribers, but also how much of each video will be sponsored and/or how many videos the company would like to sponsor. In Mae's case, she uploaded two videos per month because she had an arrangement with a company that would sponsor two of her videos per month

(Mae). Interestingly, six of the artists involved in this research were regularly sponsored by or had previously been sponsored by the same company.⁷

A third way that artists use YouTube to generate revenue is by advertising their own products. In the vignette at the beginning of this introduction, an online shop was mentioned ("I ordered all of the plushies for the next shop update"), new products for that online shop were shown, ("this is what they [the plushies] look like, and I love how they turned out"), and products for those who support the artist's Patreon account were described, ("I also got this package in the mail, and I think it's the stickers for this month's Patreon rewards!"). The format of the studio vlog, in which artists film snippets of their daily lives that are related to their work, easily allows them to expose their YouTube audiences to not only their artmaking practices, such as painting or sketching, but also their small businesses and products for sale. Importantly, studio vlogs also regularly showcase artists in the process of creating, for example, these products and Patreon rewards. At the end of the vignette, this is briefly mentioned ("before I finish up work for the day, I think I'm going to...start sketching next month's Patreon art print on my iPad"). In addition to concrete products, including both shop products and Patreon rewards, artists also advertise their other social media platforms through their YouTube videos. For example, Amy filmed herself taking and editing photos on her phone of two stickers and an art print in a July studio vlog. In this part of the vlog, she included a caption that said, "photographing my Patreon benefits to post [on Instagram]" (Amy).

Significantly, YouTube not only offers artists several ways to earn money directly, but also enables them to make money on other platforms by fostering intimate relationships with

⁷ Artists regularly use this company's service as part of their work. It is plausible that the company often receives new customers from the artists' audiences, which would make it profitable for them to sponsor the artists regularly. Artists' viewers frequently expressed interest in becoming self-employed in YouTube comments, making the service attractive to them. Additionally, artists likely have overlapping audiences, and viewers receiving multiple positive reviews of the service from creators they trust could prompt them to invest in it.

their viewers. By watching artists' content that refers to online shops, Patreon pages, and social media accounts, viewers can see not only other ways that they can interact with and support artists they watch on YouTube, but they can also see the "behind-the-scenes" of different art products available for purchase. Some artists felt that this was a primary reason why people were interested in their YouTube videos and purchasing their work. In her interview, Amy said, " I think people love seeing behind the scenes to the art. It gives you a more personal relationship with the artist and you can see how their art is created and brainstormed. Also, they feel more inclined to support the artist when they feel connected to you" (Amy). This sentiment was expressed also by Bea in a YouTube video specifically about Patreon and advice for viewers who may be interested in starting Patreon accounts.

"Personally, when I watch creators on YouTube, I love to know who they are. I befriend them...that's huge for me - supporting creators that I know who they are, what their personality is like, someone I see as a friend. This is a perk when I get on Patreon. It's way easier for me to tap that...join tier button when they're on YouTube, and I know who they are, and they're my secret friend...rather than, I see someone on Instagram that posts art and I don't even know who they are, and they don't really shine any sort of personality through their posts" (Bea).

Bea goes on to point out that viewers' desire to get to know her by watching her content is also reflected in the growth of her Patreon account. In the same video, she says, "something that's helped me through my whole journey of Patreon is the huge link between Patreon and YouTube...I notice huge spikes in my Patrons when I post YouTube videos almost any time" (Bea). That posting on YouTube can increase Bea's number of Patrons speaks to an important motivator for artists to not only establish a presence on YouTube, but also to continuously post on the platform (Figure 1.3). To reiterate, if posting on YouTube increases the amount of paying

Patrons on Patreon, there is a clear monetary incentive for artists to post consistently on YouTube.⁸

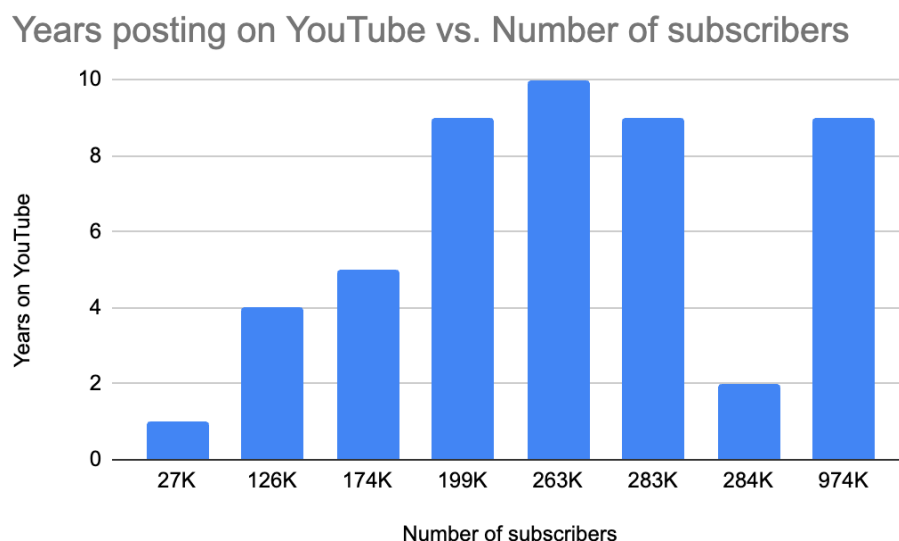


Figure 1.3 Graph showing the number of YouTube subscribers artists have on their main channels compared to the number of years since their earliest YouTube video (that remains public on their channel) as of June 2022. There is an overall trend where artists who have been posting on YouTube longer tend to have higher numbers of subscribers. Source: YouTube.

In sum, the artists referenced throughout this thesis earned money from YouTube in combinations of the following ways: allowing ads to play before, after, and throughout their videos, working with sponsoring companies, and advertising their own products and Patreon rewards. More information about how Instagram and Patreon are involved in artists' generation and maintenance of revenue streams will be provided in the next two sections.

⁸ Artists create value through their labor on and therefore generate profit for social media platforms. Producing intimate, albeit mediated and para-social, relationships with their viewers is a key part of that; the more artists post, the more connected their viewers may feel to them and the more they may interact with the artists' content, benefiting both the artist and the social media platforms. See Rojek's *Presumed intimacy: Para-social relationships in media, society & celebrity culture* for more information on this topic.

Instagram

The Atlantic described Instagram as "the new mall" (Lorenz 2019). While Instagram provides content creators the opportunity to sell products to their followers like a mall provides store owners the opportunity to sell products to their visitors, Instagram differs from a mall in that it is also a social media platform that allows users to message each other and upload content about anything, including their work, their lives, their pets, their interests, etc. There are three different types of content that artists posted on Instagram throughout the course of this research: posts, Stories, and Reels. A post is an image or photo published on one's Instagram account. All of the artists had public accounts, which means that anyone, even if they are not a follower of their account, can see all of their posts. Posts can be captioned and also commented on by others. Stories are similar to posts, but have more flexible formatting and are automatically deleted from one's account after 24 hours. One can post images and photos on Stories but also other types of content. For example, one can "repost" others' Stories or posts (meaning that another's Story or post is copied and posted again on one's Stories), ask questions to viewers, create polls, go "live" or stream video, and more. Users can also add music, captions/subtitles, and stickers (small images that are often illustrated), and countdowns that show the amount of time before, for example, a new YouTube video will be released to their Stories. This feature was launched in 2016 (Instagram 2016). Stories were the most-often posted form of content for artists throughout this research. A Reel is like an Instagram post, except that it is a video. These videos can range in length, but are usually no more than a few seconds. This feature was launched on the platform in 2020 (Instagram 2020). Reels were the least-often posted form of content by the eight artists throughout this research (Figure 1.4).

Types of Instagram content posted

June and July 2022

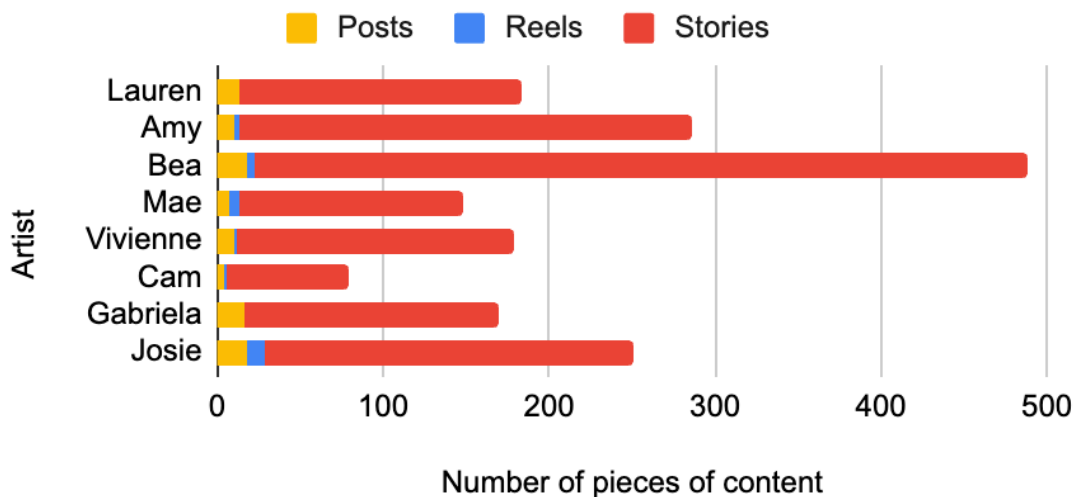


Figure 1.4 Graph showing how many of each type of Instagram content artists posted on their main accounts, personal accounts, and other accounts between June and July 2022. Source: Instagram.

There are several different types of posts, Stories, and Reels that the artists I followed uploaded to Instagram throughout the course of this research, including personal life updates, pet photos, travel clips, etc. In this section however, I will focus on a few commonly-posted genres of Instagram content that are explicitly related to money-making and collaborations, including announcements, what I am calling "sale celebrations," and opportunities for audience participation.

Similar to YouTube, artists shared with their Instagram followers not only information about their artmaking practices, such as sketching, but also products for sale, such as art prints and stickers, and monthly Patreon rewards. Rather than being primarily about the "behind-the-scenes" work behind those products, as their YouTube studio vlogs often were, Instagram posts about these products frequently functioned as announcements and advertisements. For example, Bea posted three pictures of her June Patreon rewards, including a

sticker of a vase with flowers and a print of a bird painting, along with this caption: "★ junes' rewards are qts [meaning "cuties"] ★ join any time in the month of June to receive these. \$10 tier for the postcard or the \$15 tier for both! link in bio [meaning in her Instagram account profile] (◡‿◡)" (Bea). A post about the release of new rewards or products was often accompanied by at least one Instagram Story as well. To continue the previous example, Bea posted the following Stories on the same day regarding the June Patreon rewards:

1. A repost of the post described above (an image of the same post) with the text "junes' rewards are cute :)"
2. A short video showing the front and back of the June Patreon postcard with the artist's dog and the text "Noah loves them!"
3. A short video showing the flower sticker with a link to PATREON.COM (Bea).

As is shown by the 3-to-1 ratio of Instagram Stories to posts regarding the release of the Patreon rewards for the month of June for this artist, one of the appeals of Instagram Stories as a form of content is the ease with which they can be posted. Because Instagram Stories are ephemeral, less time can be spent editing or otherwise "perfecting" them. The permanence of Instagram posts, in contrast, demands more thought and preparation. The importance of Instagram posts was described by Vivienne in her interview. She said, "I just kind of use Instagram as basically a portfolio. So like, when I meet new people, or if people want to get like an idea of the kind of work I make, you can absolutely look at my Instagram" (Vivienne). For this artist, her Instagram account could potentially lead to job opportunities so it follows that she would think carefully about how she was curating her account and developing her posts.

Significantly, announcements also cover YouTube video releases, YouTube Premieres, and collaborations or sponsorships. For example, Bea posted an Instagram Story with a picture of

flowers and juices with the thumbnail of her YouTube video titled "MAY STUDIO VLOG." (A thumbnail is the image that appears above the title of a YouTube video before it is clicked on.) A "countdown," or digital clock that documents the number of hours, minutes, and seconds until an event happens, was also shown in this Story. In this case, the countdown was showing the time until the Premiere of the vlog. The text, "Vlog premiering today at 12 PM EST !!!" also appeared on the Instagram Story announcing this event (Bea). These kinds of announcements to Instagram followers can increase viewership on YouTube videos, traffic to sponsoring companies' sites, the number of products being sold, and participation at events being held in collaboration with the artists.

Another category of content is sale celebrations. For example, Amy reposted the following Instagram Story from someone who had bought her art on their Instagram Stories: the Story was a video showing a package they received of a plush bunny with the text "omg omg look what just came!!! Penny ❤️@Amy." The artist responded with the text "IT'S STARTING. THE BUNNY INVASION" (Amy). In this interaction, a customer of the Amy's online shop bought a product and then posted an Instagram Story about their excitement at receiving that product. Importantly, the customer "tagged," or included Amy's "handle" (account name, e.g. @Amy), in their Story. Because Amy was tagged in the Story, she was alerted by Instagram. This allowed her to more easily see the Story and therefore more easily respond. The reason that I am calling this interaction a sale celebration is because the customer is celebrating the receipt of the purchased product, and the artist is celebrating the completion of a sale, or in this case multiple sales as is shown by her use of the word invasion in her response. Artists' Stories frequently responded to customers' Stories about receiving their products, especially after a shop update or the mailing of physical monthly Patreon rewards when a lot of products were being

distributed. Therefore, it seems likely that implicit in the purchase of Patreon rewards or shop products is agreement that a customer's Instagram account and Instagram Story/post will be featured on the artist's Instagram Stories if the customer mentions the artist's product and tags the artist. In this way, these sale celebrations function as an acknowledgement of the customer's contribution to the income of the artist, as well as their status as a fan or supporter of the artist.⁹ Therefore, they can also function as a display of gratitude on the part of the artist for that support.¹⁰

It is important to note here that these sale celebrations also advertise for the artist. When a customer posts about a product, their happiness with it, and tags the creator, their followers can be exposed to that same product and creator.¹¹ Additionally, when the artist responds to or reposts the customer's Story or post, they can capitalize on the labor of the customer who took the time to make an Instagram Story or post about the artist's product by sharing it as an advertisement on their own account. I would like to add that in addition to advertisements about products, audience members also advertise artists' YouTube videos and other online content. I frequently documented Instagram Stories about supporters consuming this content that were reposted by artists in the same way as was described above.

The final genre of Instagram content I'd like to highlight is opportunities for audience participation. While announcements spread the word about scheduled opportunities for participation and sale celebrations are examples of audience members responding to artists' content or products, the kinds of participation I am referring to involve direct interaction with an artist's Instagram Story (though not reposting). For example, one feature Instagram offers

⁹ Being knowledgeable about and deftly navigating these social dynamics is part of the artists' work and is also a work skill.

¹⁰ In other words, this transaction between Patron and artist can involve a promise of intimacy, where Instagram Stories act as a medium through which this promise is enacted.

¹¹ The followers are also exposed to a kind of affect due to the expression of happiness displayed in the sale celebration.

through their Stories is a poll. Vivienne posted a Story with four options of a Patreon reward sticker in different colors with the text "which one of these speaks to you the most? (poll in the next story)." The following Story had a poll and a close-up picture of the previous Story with each sticker numbered (Vivienne). In this example, Vivienne asked her Patrons and potential Patrons what kind of rewards they would prefer to receive. This allows these supporters to feel heard and represented, and also to know that Vivienne values their opinion. For Vivienne, it allows her to ensure that her supporters will enjoy the products they receive and drum up additional interest in buying them or supporting her via Patreon.¹²

There are other features that offer opportunities for audience participation, including short answer chat boxes, reactions where viewers can slide an emoji from left to right to show to what extent they feel that emoji encompasses their emotional response to the subject of the Instagram Story, and multiple-choice-style voting in which there is a "correct" answer that can be guessed. Some artists ask questions not only about their art and products, but also about the well-being of their audience, fashion advice, what they should draw, etc. These kinds of engagement with their audiences that extend beyond posting photos of finished artwork arguably show a bit more of the personality of the artists, by which I mean an interest in forging (or giving the appearance of forging) personal connections with their viewers.¹³ As was argued previously, showing "personality" through social media content is important for gaining YouTube viewers and Patrons because it allows potential supporters to feel that they "know" the artist (see Bea's quote above).

¹² In this way, affect and perceptions of intimacy translate to monetary support for the artist.

¹³ Another way to describe artists showing personality is with the language of "authenticity," which means being "real," "relatable," honest, and one who shares positive and negative experiences in their content. The performance of vulnerability is involved in achieving this state of authenticity, showing personality, and developing intimacy in para-social relationships with viewers.

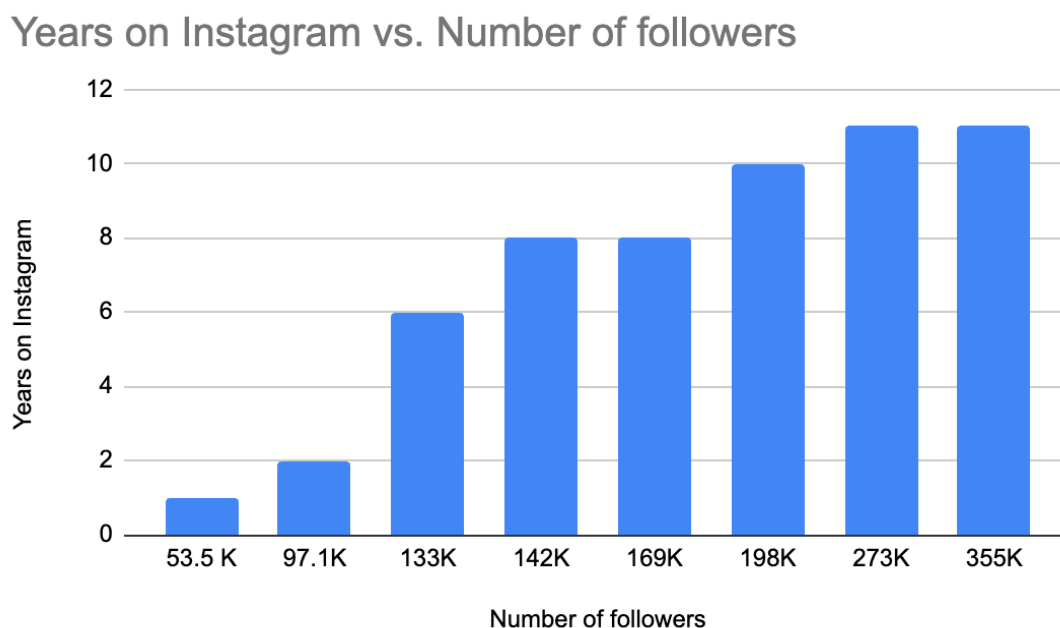


Figure 1.5 Graph showing the number of Instagram followers artists have on their main accounts compared to the number of years since the creation of their main Instagram account as of June 2022. There is an overall trend where artists who have been posting on Instagram longer tend to have higher numbers of followers. Source: Instagram.

Finally, I would like to add that the number of followers of artists' Instagram accounts, as opposed to YouTube subscribers or Patrons, does have an effect on their opportunities for client work, sponsorships, and other types of work collaboration (Figure 1.5). This is another way that Instagram is a valuable asset to them, beyond a way to make announcements, garner unpaid advertising from supporters, and interact with their audience members. As Vivienne shared in her interview, "when I meet new people, or if people want to get, like, an idea of the kind of work I make...they're gonna be impressed by my follower count [on Instagram], which is always fun, and, like, a cool brag, um, but they can at least get a glimpse at the kind of work that I do. And then they can go - and then from there, they can sort of choose how they want to interact with the stuff that I make" (Vivienne).

In sum, artists use Instagram in a multitude of ways, including to announce new products, collaborations, or events, to respond to customers or viewers of their content, and to offer opportunities for their supporters to interact with them through various features on Instagram Stories. A key point about the second use of Instagram is that artists benefit from the unpaid advertising by their customers and viewers, who post Instagram Stories about receiving their products or watching their content. Finally, artists' Instagram accounts as wholes also function as art portfolios, and their posts and follower counts can impact their ability to secure client work or other collaborations.

Patreon

The Province described Patreon as "the new kickstarter for creators' careers" soon after it launched (Darbyshire 2014). Founded in 2013, Patreon is a website that allows viewers and fans to offer direct financial support to artists and other creators through paying monthly fees for various types of content (Peckham 2019).¹⁴ Supporters of artists' Patreon accounts are called Patrons. The kinds of content that are available on Patreon, or "Patreon rewards," are dependent on the size of the monthly fee that the Patrons pay. Each creator offers multiple "tiers," or membership levels, that offer various "rewards," or benefits, including access to "posts," or updates/announcements. Membership to one tier, a "sticker club," for example, might cost five dollars per month in exchange for the following rewards: one monthly mailed sticker, access to a Patron-only shop, an opportunity to participate in a monthly drawing challenge, access to a monthly podcast episode, access to Discord, an app that allows Patrons to virtually message the artist and each other, and other perks. There are usually also more expensive tiers offered; these

¹⁴ This makes Patreon the newest out of the three sites described in this chapter. YouTube was launched in 2005, while Instagram was in 2010 (Hosch 2023, Eldridge 2023).

tend to include all of the benefits from the cheaper tiers and more benefits, such as monthly original paintings. All but one of the artists I followed have a Patreon account, and all but one of the artists who do offer art prints and stickers as possible rewards.

Patrons can interact with artists on Patreon by commenting on their posts and voting on various topics such as the colors for the month's mailed sticker or the theme of the next YouTube video. Depending on the rewards that the artists offer, Patrons can also participate in a livestream, submit questions for a question-and-answer-style video, or otherwise reach the artist.¹⁵

While Patreon does offer a way for fans to further interact with creators through these rewards, its primary target audience is not fans but the creators who use the platform. It has advertised with headlines like "Live your Passion. Empowering a new generation of content creators." in 2013 or "Creators, come get paid." in 2018 (Patreon 2013, Patreon 2018). This is because Patreon, more than other platforms, seems to offer security: a way to ensure that creators receive a steady and reliable stream of monthly revenue. In fact, co-founder Jack Conte first pitched Patreon to his YouTube followers so that he would be able to afford to create ambitious music videos. According to techcrunch.com, "the small amount of ad revenue he expected from YouTube wouldn't come close to repaying the thousands of dollars he was expecting to spend" on these videos (Peckham 2019). For the artists I followed for this research project who have Patreon accounts, Patreon does seem to deliver on the promise of financial security and significant financial support.

¹⁵ As Velthuis writes, "contemporary art dealers maintain that...rather than providing a 'showcase for commodities,' they aimed at engaging in a 'privileged dialogue with the artist'" (Velthuis 2005 21). Similarly, providing exclusive access to artists and other creators is a key part of what Patreon offers; on their site, they promise creators the opportunity to "build a space purely for your most passionate fans, where you can connect beyond just likes and shares" (Patreon, n.d.).

In her interview, when asked what she liked and didn't like about Patreon, Vivienne said that Patreon has "pretty much paid my bills since day one...[It] pays my rent, pays for my groceries...pays for all my fun cool equipment, they paid for my gaming computer...I do love Patreon in that way in the way that it supports me financially" (Vivienne). In a video about creating a new art studio/work space in her new apartment, Lauren said, "I'm so grateful to be in this much larger one [space] that's all mine. I run an online store, I have a Patreon, and it's actually thanks to my Patrons that I'm able to have the financial support to move and even furnish a place like this one" (Lauren). Both of these examples show the extent to which Patreon enables artists to make large purchases and pay their bills and is generally key to their financial survival.

In their YouTube videos, artists regularly and sometimes even in every video express gratitude for their Patrons.¹⁶ Bea always ends her videos in this way. For example, she ended one video by saying, "I want to give a shout out to my [nickname] Patrons. Hi [nickname] Patrons! Thank you for supporting me and being my little huge support system - oxymoron with a little huge, but you get what I'm saying. I'm so happy to have you. If you have been a Patron, or you are or you might be soon, or never [laughs], thank you so much. My job would be impossible without you, so thank you [nickname]" (Bea). While this expression of gratitude was taking place, an explosion of small pink hearts repeatedly played over the video and Bea's face, further emphasizing and showcasing her love for her Patrons.

A final example that shows the extent to which Patreon is a valuable source of revenue and an important part of some artists' work responsibilities has to do with the amount of time that artists spend per month on preparing and sending out their Patreon rewards. Importantly, this is

¹⁶ The relationship between artists and Patrons extends beyond the founding of the website Patreon. As Gerber writes, artisans and master craftsmen were employed "in contractual relationships with men we now remember as 'patrons'" in the fifteenth century European art world (Gerber 2020 13).

heavily dependent on the number of Patrons that the artists have, as well as the kinds of rewards that they offer to them. For example, if an artist offers a tier with a monthly mailed sticker, however many Patrons are subscribed to that tier will impact how much time they spend packing the rewards for that tier. If they also offer a tier with a monthly mailed sticker and art print, they will need to spend time designing and manufacturing those prints, in addition to the stickers, and pack those rewards as well. Some artists involved in this research have relatively newer Patreon accounts or accounts with fewer Patreons, but others have almost 3,000.

The following quote is taken from a YouTube video uploaded two years ago by one of the artists followed for this research. While it is an older video, it does show the extent to which keeping up with Patreon-related responsibilities each month can take up time, which is relevant to this artist and other artists' work on Patreon today. Bea said, "I design my postcard and sticker every month at the beginning of the month. I order it within the first week...I prep my envelopes to mail my postcards and stickers in...the middle weeks. The last week, I make my video and ship out my stuff...I might trickle in many originals [one-of-a-kind pieces of art] throughout the month, I might do them all in one day at the end of the month, [I] might do them all one day at the beginning of the month" (Bea). As this quote shows, Patreon responsibilities extend throughout the month, every month, especially for an artist like this one who has thousands of Patrons. As Bea says later in the video, this limits her ability to spend time on other areas of her work or other kinds of work opportunities. "Patreon is a really big chunk of my time, which is cool, but also it tends to overshadow other projects I want to take on. I have to be very intentional about what I want to spend my time on now more than I used to because I know Patreon is going to be a big chunk of my month" (Bea).

Because Patreon can demand much of these artists' time and energy, and because Patreon can make up so much of their monthly and yearly income, it follows that the making of artists' Patreon rewards will be featured prominently in their YouTube videos, as well as the finished rewards on their Instagram accounts. As was mentioned earlier, Bea has spoken freely on YouTube about the important connection between her YouTube videos and number of Patrons (whenever she posts a video, she gains Patrons). This shows the extent to which participation on a platform like YouTube is connected to the maintenance of a Patreon account. This tie between YouTube and Patreon extends beyond the artists to the founding of the website, which sought to offer a more substantial and steady source of income than YouTube ad revenue.¹⁷ As is shown by how important Patreon is to these artists financially today, this offer of security appears to, at least to some extent, materialize. It additionally shows that the artists' participation on other social media platforms, when it comes to income, are secondary and their content often focuses on Patreon rewards. Finally, while my interview data does not demonstrate a strong connection between Patreon and Instagram for my participants, Instagram does offer another way to publicize and advertise Patreon rewards, and is therefore also part of this three-way relationship that I conceptualize here.

Peer interactions

Throughout this chapter thus far, the focus has been on artists as individuals, the digital platforms that make their work possible, and the similarities and differences between their work-related practices. However, it is also worth noting that several of these artists interact with each other in a variety of ways, including through sending products to each other, watching each

¹⁷ When Jack Conte first pitched Patreon to his YouTube subscribers in 2013, "his creative economics [changed] practically overnight." While he normally had made "\$100 in [YouTube] ad revenue per video, his fans commit[ed] to funding him with more than \$5,000 per video within the first few weeks of the announcement" (Peckham 2019).

other's social media content, and meeting in person.¹⁸ In her interview, Vivienne described that she felt like part of a group of contemporaries, a "niche of people" on the Internet, that included herself, "Bea, Cam, Lauren, Amy, Mae - I'm just, like, naming all the people that I love and admire" (Vivienne). That she named five other artists I followed as part of this research and identified herself among them shows the extent to which, for her, she identified as part of a group, despite simultaneously identifying as self-employed.

One of the ways in which this group of artists support each other is by sharing each other's products, art, and social media content with the audiences on their social media pages. For example, Lauren "unboxed" an assortment of gifts from Gabriela on her YouTube channel (this involves unwrapping and revealing each item within the box while describing the items). She said,

"Oh my God...I'm dead - look at this [print of two cats]...John [her partner] Look it's a bag! Oh my God, I think...this bag is early release...I'm obsessed with this washi tape, and I ran out of my roll, and I'm so glad she gave me another one - um wow, thank you!...Oh, this is a Post-It - okay, this is actually sticky - that's super nice [sticky notes are more expensive to manufacture than memo pads]. Wow, Gabriela [is] so good at designing...look at this sticker sheet - I know you can get sticker sheets on Gabriela's Patreon too, which is so cool...Ah, I love this [print of giant strawberry surrounded by cats]. I was on stream [a viewer of the artist's livestream, usually on the platform Twitch] when she designed this, okay, I'm a real fan. This month's Patreon print - why am I advertising? [laughs] This is so cute - I really love this" (Lauren).

In this lengthy unboxing segment of Lauren's YouTube video, she shows several products that Gabriela is selling or will be selling, compliments her designs, mentions her Patreon account, and also reveals herself to be a self-declared "fan" of Gabriela. All of these positive reviews can increase awareness about Gabriela and her work, as well as increase traffic to her

¹⁸ In contrast to previous examples of affective investment between viewers and artists, these are examples of affective investment between artists.

shop and Patreon. Therefore, Lauren notices, she is also providing advertising for Gabriela, even though their relationship may be more complex beyond that [friends, peers, etc.].

In addition to showcasing other artists' products and art on their social media pages, artists also document themselves watching other artists' social media content.¹⁹ For example, in one Instagram Story, Gabriela showed herself watching another artist's YouTube video on her computer with the text "@sadshrimps keepin me company while i work!! catching up on so many vlogs today" (Gabriela). In this example, Gabriela shows that she, like her followers, enjoys watching studio vlogs and art content. Therefore, they have something in common; they are all fans of artists who work online. Showing another artist's vlog also functions as advertising for that artist and could result in increased numbers of viewers on their YouTube channel or followers of their Instagram account. Overall, this is an example of an artist perhaps learning from a peer, enjoying studio vlog content, supporting a friend, advertising a channel their followers might enjoy, or a combination of some or all of these.

Sometimes artists also share that they were inspired by another artist to try a particular technique or material in their artmaking or change something about their social media content. For instance, Lauren tried the format of a "day in the life" YouTube video instead of a studio vlog, opening up possibilities to show more cooking, leisure activities, errands, and aspects of her life other than artmaking. She opened the video by saying, "Hello hello! Welcome back to a brand new video... This is going to be a 'day in my life.' [I] always wanted to film one of these. I don't know why it's taken me so long, but I got really inspired by Gabriela's video. I love that video - it's just, like, [it] was really nice to see what someone did in their routine, and I was just,

¹⁹ This is another type of "response" content like the "sale celebrations" discussed in the Instagram section. As I discussed there, this content genre is important for artists' revenue generation.

like, I'll make one too" (Lauren). This example speaks to the ways in which artists, through keeping up with each other's art and content, can influence each other's work.

Finally, artists sometimes meet up with each other in-person, when the opportunity arises. In a large-scale example, Cam published a YouTube video about going on an art retreat with five other artists and illustrators (Cam). In another example, Bea posted a series of photos on her personal/secondary Instagram account (meaning, a separate Instagram account from the one on which she posts about art product announcements, etc.), including a selfie with a peace sign with another artist in a store (Bea). Location plays a big role in whether or not artists can easily meet in person; the artists I followed for this project live across and outside of the United States, making meeting up offline somewhat challenging.

While the self-employed artists in this thesis complete a lot of their work independently or sometimes with the help of one assistant, there are times and moments when they do connect with each other online and offline. It is likely that some or several of these meetings are not publicized on their social media accounts, though all of the examples I have provided were. That these artists do interact with each other and consume each other's content, even advertising it, shows the extent to which they do or can operate within some kind of group dynamic and network.

In her interview, Vivienne said, "when you're doing, like, the specific sort of niche of work that I am where you're making content on the Internet as well as like, er – when I used to – as well as like selling stuff... you're wearing so many different hats" (Vivienne). This quote speaks to the multitude of activities and roles that artists take on as part of their work. As has been discussed above, the types of work activities that these artists engage in are shaped by the limitations and affordances of the platforms on which they post. YouTube, Instagram, and

Patreon offer them different ways to earn revenue, connect with their supporters, and create content about their lives and their art. Finally, the last section outlined the ways in which I documented artists connecting with and supporting each other through social media, showing that there is a sense of group identity among some of these artists. The next chapter will build on this background information and turn to the ways in which the artists speak about self-employment and how those ideas reflect neoliberal ideology.

Chapter 2: The Paradox of Self-Employment

In one of her YouTube videos, Bea answered several questions from her Instagram followers. One was, "did you have any influential people in your life that inspired you to pursue art?" Among the people that she listed were four YouTubers.

"After I quit college, I saw Audra Auclair on Youtube and Jacquelin Deleon and [indecipherable name], and I was like, oh man. That's what I want to be doing. So those three really showed me that...being an artist online was possible. Oh also Cam - when I started watching her videos and seeing how she ran her business, I was like, oh - so that's an avenue - because before, I was doing my own thing...I was doing custom pet portraits and home portrait watercolors through Etsy, which was totally fine, but it wasn't bringing me like the spark of joy and creativity in art. So those three or four artists really showed me that I could start my own business, which was so cool, and I literally never believed that I would ever do it...So it's really cool to look back on that time in my life, like five or six years ago, and I was like that's a cool dream - I'm gonna start drawing, and then now I'm here, like that's absolutely wild" (Bea).

In this partial account of Bea's inspirations and motivations for pursuing self-employment, she notes that her previous job selling custom portraits on the website Etsy, which hosts various small businesses on its platform that sell gifts and other items, did not give her the opportunity to be creative like starting her own business would. This perceived perk of being a self-employed artist online was echoed by other artists in their online content, as were other perceived perks including having control over one's time, being independent, and having the ability to prioritize happiness and creativity. This chapter outlines how artists understand self-employment, what kinds of benefits they believe come from self-employment, and how these ideas are spread and reflect neoliberalism. I will argue that these perceived perks of self-employment are paradoxical because artists' labor is shaped by the social media platforms on which they post. Finally, I will argue that it is in the interests of the social media platforms on which the artists post, like YouTube and Patreon, that these artists believe in those narratives around self-employment.

What is neoliberalism?

As Ganti describes, scholars have theorized neoliberalism as both "a structural force that affects people's lives and life-chances" and "an ideology of governance that shapes subjectivities" (Ganti 2014 90). By "structural force," Ganti is referring to "economic policies and economic restructuring efforts" that align with neoliberal values of "individualism, entrepreneurialism, and market competition" (Ganti 2014 94). These economic policies are implemented on a local and global scale. As Graeber writes, neoliberal economic theory consists of the following ideas: "Governments should minimize their engagement in economic planning...Reducing trade barriers is always good and always benefits all parties...[and] Government spending policies meant to benefit the poor...are ultimately counterproductive" (Graeber 2009 81).

The term "neoliberalism" distinct from classical liberalism in a few ways. In the nineteenth century, classical liberalism referred to the belief in "individual liberty...founded on private property rights." Those who were seen as liberal "tended to reject government interference in the economy as much as in personal affairs" (Graeber 2009 80). Neoliberalism is different from classical liberalism in that "its idea of a good society is not 'natural,' but instead can only come about through a concerted political effort and organization." While they both hold the belief that markets are "a more efficient mechanism to communicate information about supply, demand, and prices" than the state, neoliberalism is interested in "redefin[ing] the nature and functions of the state rather than completely eliminat[ing] it" (Ganti 2014 92).

In this thesis, I will also be using neoliberalism and capitalism differently, though neoliberalism is sometimes used as a temporal term to refer to capitalism in the 21st century. As Ganti describes, "whereas late capitalism is a descriptive or explanatory concept that indexes a

set of changes in the organizational structures of production and in relationships between states, industrial capital, and labor, neoliberalism is a prescriptive concept that articulates a normative vision of the proper relationship between the state, capital, property, and individuals" (Ganti 2014 92). Another way to put this is that capitalism is an economic and political system in which neoliberalism as an "ideological and philosophical movement" can operate.²⁰

In the arguments that follow, I use the term "neoliberalism" to refer to both a system that impacts the material realities of these artists who work online (Chapter 3) and a collection of ideas that emphasize individualism and freedom as flowing naturally from economic market logic (Chapter 2). While I am making a distinction between how I will use the term in these two chapters, it is important to note that these definitions are not mutually exclusive.

Before diving into the substance of this chapter, I would like to make a note about the history of neoliberalism. Neoliberal theory arose in the early to mid-20th century with the creation of the Mont Pelerin Society in 1947 and gained significant traction in the 1970s. A variety of figures, including Milton Friedman, Margaret Thatcher, and Ronald Reagan, and events, such as the influence of the University of Chicago on the Chilean government in the 1970s, contributed to its transition from a series of ideas held by a minority to a wave of economic policy changes (Harvey 2005). Though I will not elaborate on them here, I believe it is important to situate neoliberalism as a system and concept that has had a tremendous impact in recent decades in particular.

²⁰ For more information on other differences between these concepts, such as the geneologies of the terms and their relationships to working-class interests, see Ganti's article "Neoliberalism."

How do artists understand self-employment?

As was discussed in Chapter 1, for these artists, self-employment consists of some combination of maintaining a Patreon account, filming YouTube videos, posting on Instagram, taking on client work, live-streaming, recording podcast episodes, participating in in-person art conventions or art markets, and running an online shop. Since these responsibilities have already been discussed at length, this section focuses on the ideas that they have around self-employment rather than what they "do" as self-employed individuals. Throughout my research, I noticed four main themes about self-employment emerging from their YouTube videos, as well as in interviews. These are:

1. Self-employment offers control
2. Self-employment offers independence
3. Self-employment offers the pursuit of happiness
4. Self-employment offers opportunities to be creative

While these themes are overlapping and interconnected, we will look at each of them in turn.

Self-employment offers control

Several artists communicated through their YouTube videos that they felt a major perk of their work was that they had control over what they did for work and how they worked. For example, Bea spoke about being her own boss at length in one of her videos.

"I've been kind of reassessing what I want my job to be since I have created this job for myself. It's kind of the perk of being self-employed, of being your own boss/creating your own job is you get to pick what you're gonna do and how you're gonna do it. I don't personally take advantage of a self-employed life enough - that has been my new mindset is how am I gonna do whatever I want but also make that my job...The luxury is...I am the boss. I get to pick my schedule, I get to pick what I'm gonna do, I get to pick how I'm gonna do it. So I'm trying to take advantage of what I've created" (Bea).

In another example, Vivienne shared this in response to a question about what self-employment means to her in an interview. She said, "Yes, I do have complete control over my schedule, which is amazing...because it means that I can also do the other half of my creative life, which is acting. And so, like, I have the flexibility to go do that stuff whenever I want, which is really cool...I have the flexibility of working from home or working from my studio, I have complete control over, like, what it is that I want to do and what my career looks like, which is amazing" (Vivienne). This particular example speaks to the way in which Vivienne feels her job allows her to spend time on other things and have the ability to work around her other obligations and interests.

Another way artists describe control over their work is through the language of sustainability, which refers to being able to do a job comfortably long-term. In one YouTube video, Bea said, "If you're in the position of, I'm creating my own job, I'm doing my part-time work on the side...I've already created a self-sustaining job, and you're your own boss - just remember that you can make your job pretty much whatever you want" (Bea). While Bea is giving advice to other creatives in this quote, she is also referencing the type of job that she has through it, suggesting that these kinds of jobs that she believes can be made into "pretty much whatever you want" can also be made to be sustainable.

In another example, Lauren described how she is taking steps to make her job feel more sustainable for her. In one of her YouTube videos, she explains that "I think implementing the four day work week can help me just have more time and feel less overwhelmed and give me space to not overwork because that is my tendency...I do enjoy my work but if I'm burned out all the time, I'm not going to enjoy it for much longer, so I'm glad that I'm really putting in the effort to make some changes that can hopefully be way more sustainable for me and, you know, just

break this burnout²¹ cycle" (Lauren). Here, Lauren highlights that she wants to work one less day per week in order to enable her to pursue her job long-term. Importantly, her ability to have control over her schedule is key for implementing a change like this.

In the quotes included earlier in this section, the artists described how they believed that, by making day-to-day changes to their careers, they could create jobs that would be sustainable for them to do for years to come. This line of thinking places the responsibility of managing their careers in a sustainable way on the individual artists. As Bea said to other artists in a YouTube video, "if one part of your job isn't really working for you, there's usually a way around it where it can be made easier" (Bea). This kind of statement implies that it is the individual's responsibility to fix their work life if it is unsustainable.

Artists spoke about having control and flexibility over their work schedules and the sustainability of their careers, or the ability to do their jobs long-term, as perks of self-employment. Importantly, they discuss sustainability as their individual responsibility.

Self-employment offers freedom and independence

While independence and "being one's own boss" is somewhat similar to the idea of being in control of one's career, there are a few other ways that artists described this perk of self-employment. In a pre-recorded interview, when asked what goals and dreams she has when it comes to her work and/or life in general, Amy responded, "When I was younger so - by younger, I mean like, maybe before college...I think my goal was to be happy...obviously that has shifted a lot since I grew up and understood that happiness isn't something that you can attain and consistently have all the time...so my goal isn't happiness anymore, obviously, but I think now it's more of...freedom and independence and being able to do what I love doing without

²¹ See the "Burnout" section of Chapter 3 for more information on this term.

anyone stopping me or restricting me, and I think that is my new happiness" (Amy). For this artist, freedom and independence go hand in hand and are defined by a lack of externally imposed rules or restrictions. She describes a desire for an entirely internally-motivated drive for her work.²²

Another artist described this kind of freedom from a different perspective. In her interview, Breinne put it this way: "I'm like not all self employed people, but like in my specific field, in my specific brand of self employment, I have freedom over what my career looks like. And I don't have to cater to...the expectations of like, my audience...Because the beautiful thing about my...audience is that they're just kind of kind of along for the ride...which is something I've taken for granted in the past. And so...I'm like, you know what, whatever my journey looks like - whoever wants to follow along, is gonna to hang out" (Vivienne). Vivienne explains that she has the kind of freedom in her work that Amy aspires to have because of the nature of her audience. She is able to follow what she is interested in pursuing without worrying about the desires of her supporters.

In both of these examples, artists describe freedom and independence as benefits of being self-employed and aspects of their jobs that they appreciate.

Self-employment offers happiness

Another idea related to self-employment I saw regularly throughout my research was that self-employment can allow artists to prioritize their happiness. For example, in one YouTube video, Bea outlines how hiring an assistant to help her with emails and other computer work has changed her job.

²² This contrasts previous generations' relationships to employment where, for example, stability was prioritized and associated with 9am-5pm desk jobs.

"I have this extra time since I'm not sorting my expenses and emailing people and re-mailing stuff and figuring out all these returned orders and order problems and inquiries and stuff [so] I have time to make art. So shout out to Ryan [her assistant] for allowing me that time to do stuff...I've been able to post on Patreon more...My Patrons are such a big part of how my job functions, and I'm just wanting to always give them a little something extra, so I was able to make the Patreon podcast this month, I've been able to share my sketchbook spreads...That time is just so valuable, and I never had it before, so yeah...that's kind of what's going on this month. I've been reassessing my schedule, reassessing what I've been doing with my time, and how I can keep myself happier and healthier so I can create. It's been going really well, I feel pretty good" (Bea).

For this artist, hiring an assistant was key for having the time to reprioritize her creativity, as well as her happiness and her health. Her status as a self-employed individual who has control over her schedule allows her to make decisions like these related to her relationship with her business that ultimately contribute to her happiness.

Another artist referenced happiness when describing her experience starting out as an independent artist. "It was very scary...I was very nervous for a long time because I wasn't making a lot of money when I quit [my other job] so it was kind of a leap of faith of, like, seeing whether or not I can make it work...so I think that was kind of like the main driving force for me was that I wanted to be independent and had to make this work no matter what, or else I don't think I would be as happy" (Amy). Here, Amy links happiness to the independence she believed she would experience through self-employment.

In these excerpts, artists spoke about happiness as something that they could find through their work as self-employed individuals. Significantly, these statements from the artists point to happiness as their responsibility, rather than the responsibility of their workplaces.

Self-employment offers opportunities to be creative

Artists often spoke about "creativity" and wanting to be "creative" in their YouTube videos. As Lauren shared in one video where she answered questions from her Instagram followers, the "the best part [of my job] I feel like right now is the creative and life freedom it gives me. I find that it's like super fun and engaging, and I like being able to make my own decisions...in terms of artwork, I can make - I find that I'm at this point in my freelance career where I have a lot of autonomy [over] what kind of artwork I make too which is also really cool because not all artists can do that" (Lauren). In this quote, Lauren describes creativity as artistic freedom, where she can choose what to make and how to make it. Amy also described creativity in this way in one of her YouTube videos. She said, "recently I started a client project with [company name] and it's been really fun. They're so nice, and they're giving me so much, like, creative freedom, which I love, like, when I get client work that gives me a lot of creative freedom because it pretty much feels like I'm drawing for myself except it's gonna show up on, like, someone else's app or someone else's website" (Amy). Like Lauren, Amy describes creativity as a freedom in this statement, as well as independence, defining it as drawing for herself. Importantly, her status as a self-employed illustrator allows her to choose to take on client work and therefore experience this creative freedom.

In interviews and YouTube videos, artists discuss self-employment as something that offers them control over their work, independence and the freedom to work on what/how they want, the ability to create a job that is sustainable for them, and something that offers them opportunities to find happiness and be creative. As was mentioned earlier, these ideas are all interrelated, and control and independence especially are intertwined and are involved in all of

these ideas. The next section will discuss how each of them reflect neoliberal ideology and theory.

How do these beliefs demonstrate neoliberal ideology?

In these accounts of their jobs, artists describe control over their daily lives, freedom, independence, happiness, and creativity as things that are afforded to them through their work as self-employed individuals. This is reminiscent of neoliberal thought about individualism and freedom. As Ganti writes, a statement drafted by the Mont Pelerin Society in 1947 highlighted these two values in particular. It argued that "individual freedom could be preserved only in a society that protected private property and had a competitive market as the foundation of economic activity" (Ganti 2014 92).²³ By pointing to their work, the artists emphasize their participation in the economy as what provides them with freedom and control over their lives. This not only reflects the Mont Pelerin Society's statement about individual freedom's dependence on the market, but also the permeation of these ideas about freedom being found through work throughout society at large.

As Jaffe writes, "neoliberalism tried to sell us on freedom not from work but through work" (Jaffe 2021 10). In the examples above, the artists describe how their occupations can allow them to make art without restrictions, exemplifying the first part of Jaffe's point. Jaffe goes on to explain that the project of neoliberalism has involved "redefining 'freedom' away from a positive concept (freedom to do things) and toward a negative one (freedom from interference)" (Jaffe 2021 7). For artists who labor online, this can look like freedom from working for a

²³ This description of freedom is similar to classical liberalism. The key difference is that classical liberalism and neoliberalism have different conceptions of the role of the state in preserving individual freedom (classical liberalism advocates for the elimination of the state, while neoliberalism does not) (Ganti 2014).

hierarchical organization in which they would be an employee who reports to a boss (i.e. self-employment).

Harvey brings up a similar point to Jaffe. He writes that while the concept of freedom has been "long embedded in the US tradition" and "appeal[s] to anyone who values the ability to make decisions for themselves," interrogating what kind of freedom is truly being described or imagined is vital (Harvey 2005 5). Jaffe builds on this by describing why questioning freedom is so important. "Once upon a time, it was assumed, to put it bluntly, that work sucked, and that people would avoid it if at all humanly possible" (Jaffe 2021 2). This was the case during Fordism in the early 20th century (Jaffe 2021 12). In this period, there was a combination of "so-called high wages with an intensification of exploitation" through assembly lines (Camp 2016 48). That freedom, for these artists, can exist within their work rather than solely in their leisure time outside of it, exemplifies a current and specifically neoliberal conception of work.²⁴

While it wasn't listed as one of the key values of neoliberalism, the idea that free market ideology is sustainable is implied through its tenant that the rationality of the market always ensures the most optimal outcome. According to Harvey, neoliberal ideology holds that ultimately, the free market will lead to public good. He described that the Mont Pelerin Society's members saw the market as "the best device for mobilizing even the basest of human instincts such as gluttony, greed, and the desire for wealth and power for the benefit of all" (Harvey 2005 20). In order to achieve this, as Graeber writes, one of the main points of neoliberal theory is that government policies such as free medical care or food assistance programs "should be pared back or eliminated, since they distort the workings of the market" (Graeber 2009 81). In other

²⁴ It is important to note that artists' experiences with freedom are complicated by the way that their leisure time becomes part of their work when they create content about it. This is an aspect of this emergent form of labor that Jaffe and Harvey do not discuss. For more information on the collapse of leisure and work, see the "A note on the literature: work, play, and hobbies" section of the Introduction.

words, neoliberalism advocates for putting as few restrictions on the market as possible because government policies prevent individuals from acquiring resources in the way that the free market would allot them, limiting their personal freedom and entrepreneurial possibilities. This ideology of market freedom gets translated into the idea that values of individual freedom and independence can be realized through market participation, or work, which is seen in the quotes from the artists earlier in this chapter.²⁵

The idea of finding happiness through one's work is somewhat similar to the ideas of finding freedom and independence through work. As argued above, these ideas reflect neoliberal logics and ideology, which stipulate that various values and ideals like them can be realized through an unrestricted market.²⁶ Significantly, each of the ideas point to working and spending time at work as what will lead to positive outcomes, encouraging individuals of all employment statuses to prioritize their work. However, as Jaffe describes, this is a one-sided relationship between the individual and their work. "The compulsion to be happy at work, in other words, is always a demand for emotional work from the worker. Work, after all, has no feelings. Capitalism cannot love" (Jaffe 2021 15).

Finally, artists also described creativity as something that their position as self-employed individuals offered them.²⁷ Significantly, the connection that the artists make between creativity

²⁵ It also gets translated into the idea that aspiring to be self-employed and seeking work for oneself out of one's own entrepreneurial ambition and aspiration is commendable and something to be striven for. This is an idea that I saw reflected in YouTube comments and other forms of audience participation throughout my research; it was not uncommon to see a supporter expressing the desire to become self-employed like the artist.

²⁶ The idea that happiness can be found through work, and through becoming an Internet (art) person in particular, places being self-employed, and being self-employed through creating content, as an ideal to be reached. The connections between the Internet, influencing, self-employment, and neoliberalism are not discussed in Jaffe or Harvey's works and make this topic emergent and an area that warrants further study.

²⁷ Boellstorff discusses this relationship between creativity and labor using the term "creationist capitalism." He defines it as "a mode of capitalism in which labor is understood in terms of creativity, so that production is understood as creation" (Boellstorff 2008 206). The popularized term "content creator" used to label people who earn money from their social media posts, including the artists of this study, directly speaks to the way that creativity has become associated with work and labor.

and work reflects how creativity has been framed by companies and governments in recent years. Creativity has become a buzzword associated with work skills and perks. For example, Instagram advertises their platform using this term. "Instagram has long been a home for creativity. People not only turn to the platform to find innovative²⁸ and inspiring content, but they also use it to express themselves. Instagram provides a range of tools and surfaces that make it possible for brands to tap into their creative side — and good news: expressing creativity can lead to real business outcomes" (Instagram Business Team 2021). YouTube also markets itself as a space equipped to foster users' creativity. "We're here for every single one [of creators' ideas]. Every tool, filter, and format was built to help Creators unleash their creativity, tell their story, and connect with fans across the world" (YouTube, n.d.).²⁹

In another example, Morgan and Nelligan write critically of discourse around creativity. "Creativity is seen as a key to fast-track modernization" for countries and this reflects the "neoliberal push to reskill workers in order to kickstart the new economy" (Morgan and Nelligan 2018 3). Their use of the term neoliberal is significant; it points to why creativity has been an attractive word to incentivize workers. As has been argued above, two of the key neoliberal values are individualism and entrepreneurship. By linking creativity to work, companies and governments can draw from these neoliberal values to frame "creative" work as beneficial to workers and an overall perk of their jobs. However, framing creativity in this way obscures the negative aspects of many jobs labeled as "creative." As Morgan and Nelligan argue, "the idea of creative economy is in part a discursive trick concerned with promoting flexibility and mobility of labour and therefore fostering precariousness and inequality among workers" (Morgan and

²⁸ Innovation is another key term related to creativity that speaks to the pressure of continuously generating new content for and remaining relevant on social media.

²⁹ This language mirrors how contemporary art dealers discuss their galleries. As Velthuis writes, art dealers try to deny or minimize their tie to capitalist art markets. "Contemporary art dealers...spoke of their galleries as a 'place for experimentation,' a 'vehicle for ideas,' and a 'mild biotope' in which art can flourish" (Velthuis 2005 21).

Nelligan 2018 6).³⁰ I will return to this point to discuss artists experiences with precarity in Chapter 3.

In sum, artists' beliefs about self-employment and the perks they perceive it provides for them are steeped in values of individualism and entrepreneurship. Artists are held individually responsible for ensuring their relationship to their work is healthy, sustainable, and provides them with happiness and outlets for creativity. Additionally, the social media platforms, for example, are absolved from fostering workplace conditions that promote happiness and other positive experiences at work. These outcomes reflect the reality of neoliberal ideas in action. The next part of this chapter will take a look at how the social media platforms these artists work on, such as YouTube, Instagram, and Patreon, shape the artists' labor and complicate the ideas about self-employment outlined in this section.

What makes these artists' beliefs about self-employment paradoxical?

Before diving into the next part of this chapter, I would like to acknowledge that there are many other perks of their jobs that artists mentioned throughout the course of my digital ethnographic research and interviews. I am not able to address all of them in this thesis and have chosen to focus on the four main ideas above because they were spoken about by multiple artists. Secondly, I would also like to be clear that in asking the question, "What makes these artists' self-employment paradoxical?" I am arguing that while they do have agency in their work, and self-employment does offer them benefits, the amount of control and freedom they do have and can exercise, for example, is limited by external factors including the websites on which they work. Importantly, I will be referencing examples of artists pointing this out and acknowledging

³⁰ See the "A note on the literature: work, play, and hobbies" section of the Introduction for more information about how creativity and work has become intertwined for those who work online.

this to make this argument. These external factors will be named and explained in the rest of this chapter and Chapter 3.

How do social media platforms affect artists' work?

One of the ways in which social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram have an impact on artists' work is through their algorithms, or systems that suggest content to users based on what kinds of content those users consume and how they consume it.³¹ Importantly, an algorithm can change without any notice to the creators using the platform, and the ways in which the algorithms work are not transparently shared with creators. As a result, relying upon algorithms for views and thus revenue is uncertain and produces financial precarity, meaning that the artists' finances are placed out of their control. In her interview, Vivienne outlined how changes to the Instagram algorithm, for example, have greatly impacted her account.

"I made the move to Instagram, and my Instagram at the time back in like 2018 grew quite rapidly...People look at my Instagram now, like when I meet new people, and, you know, I have I have 133,000 followers, which is a lot of people. But...that number hasn't moved in, year and a half, two years. I've kind of been stuck, I guess, at that number, because the Instagram algorithm has changed in such a way that...if you are not the kind of artist who is also just like, super regularly kind of cranking out content, where you're posting posts, every day, you're posting Reels every day, you're posting...pretty constantly, because the Instagram algorithm now favors like, oh, if...so and so isn't...interacting with this creator's posts, it must mean they don't want to see them. They don't take into account that maybe that creator just doesn't post as frequently. And so as a result, like sure I have 133,000 followers, but my posts only get seen by maybe 2- 3% of them now. Which is unfortunate, especially when I'm, like, sharing artwork that I'm really excited about because I want people to see it" (Vivienne).

As this quote shows, because Instagram favors creators that post content often and regularly, not posting often and regularly can lead to one's posts not being seen by most of one's audience. This

³¹ Several anthropologists have written about algorithms and the importance of acknowledging them not as autonomous systems, but human-created and human-driven ones. As Seaver writes, "there is no such thing as an algorithmic decision; there are only ways of seeing decisions as algorithmic...algorithms, we can say, *are* culture—another name for a collection of human choices and practices" (Seaver 2018).

can therefore impact how artists use the platform and encourage them to post very frequently. In this way, Instagram has the potential to affect how artists involve Instagram in their work, including how much of their workload they devote to developing content for Instagram, complicating the idea that they have complete control over their time and work-related content.

Other artists also spoke about frustration with the Instagram algorithm specifically throughout my research. As Lauren said in one of her videos, she is hesitant to give advice about how to grow social media accounts.

"I really hesitate to answer questions like this just because of how awful I find the Instagram algorithm has gotten for me. I feel like even in the past two weeks I've seen like a huge drop [in interaction], and I don't think it's because my art has suddenly become very uninteresting. I feel like my posts just aren't getting pushed very far out and yeah, I feel like there's been a really really awful change in algorithm-related things... a lot of it is really luck-based, so what I will say is try not to be too hard on yourself. It's not a testament of your work or how good you are as an artist and whether people like you and stuff like that. It's just, like, these apps are pretty trash these days" (Lauren).

Like Vivienne, Lauren points to how these changes in the Instagram algorithm are out of her control (posts performing well is, in her opinion, "luck-based").

In contrast, I found opinions on YouTube's algorithms to be more mixed. As Amy said in her interview, "What I like most about YouTube is that it feels the most consistent as a social media platform. It doesn't randomly change algorithms for the worse like Instagram" (Amy).

Lauren, however, still noticed that the YouTube algorithm affected her negatively.

"I've noticed that my YouTube performance has gone down significantly... just like the past four videos or so, and I don't know why this is happening... it is definitely like stressful too because I make a huge portion of my income from YouTube so yeah, I always get worried... in terms of YouTube, it's like algorithms are so arbitrary, like, I don't know what it is about certain videos that get like 40k [views] versus videos that get seven... I don't know what it is and I feel like I don't... want to give myself a headache analyzing something that actually doesn't make sense" (Lauren).

In this example, Lauren explains that the mystery surrounding social media algorithms adds to the extent to which they are out of creators' control, even if those creators significantly depend on them financially.

The uncertainty surrounding how well artists' Instagram and YouTube content will perform and therefore, how much money they will make from that content, impacts how some of these creators approach not only their content, but also their art. As Amy said in her interview, "I feel like Instagram shaped the art I make in terms of seeing what my audience likes. I would like to say that it doesn't influence my art, but putting your work out there and seeing what people like and dislike makes you unconsciously draw more of the things that will do better on social media" (Amy). In the same video cited above in which Lauren shared that her YouTube performance was down, she asked her followers what they would like to see from her. "I also want to make sure I'm making things that y'all are interested in. Feel free to let me know, you know...what your vibe is, what you like seeing in my videos, what you want to see more of and I will be happy to comply" (Lauren). In both of these quotes, the artists show that, at times, they do curate their work to their audience members in order for their art and content to be seen and/or supported by more people. This complicates not only the idea that these artists have complete control over what art and content they make but also the freedom and independence to make whatever they want without external restrictions.

Additionally, another way that social media platforms shape artists' labor and affect their freedom, control, and independence when it comes to their art and their work is through the establishment of content and product genres. For example, all of the artists I followed for this research posted studio vlogs, a popular type of YouTube video that allows viewers to see some "behind the scenes" of the artists they admire, on YouTube between summer 2021 and summer

2022. That these artists posted studio vlogs on their YouTube channels for at least one year and usually much longer than that shows their commitment to producing videos in this genre.

Adhering to a video genre like this can limit the kinds of clips the creator can include in their videos. For example, it may be out of place to include a clip of going to the beach during a tutorial about how to make a portrait using gouache paints, but it may fit in well in a travel vlog. This can affect artist' freedom of expression in their content.

Another example has to do with Patreon rewards. Of the seven artists I followed for this research that have a Patreon account, six of them offer a monthly mailed print and sticker. Six of them offer a monthly podcast. Five of them offer a discount in their online shop. Five of them offer content related to their sketches or sketchbooks. This points to the establishment of genres of Patreon rewards for these visual artists (Figure 2.1). In her interview, Vivienne discussed how she was influenced by another artist when she first designed her Patreon rewards.

"I remember when I first started my Patreon page...my \$30 tier was a one-on-one Skype date, monthly...My \$20 tier was a...Q&A tier...Because Cam, who is another extremely successful like Internet illustrator presence...her \$20 dollar tier was a Q&A thing. So I was like, well, I can make it a Q&A thing...And then my \$10 tier I think at the time was I think I was doing monthly livestreams, again, like Cam...my \$2 tier was a monthly printable, and my \$5 tier was my sketchbook tier" (Vivienne).

That several artists offer the same types of rewards and that they can influence each other's rewards speaks to the way that creators and content genres can affect the type of work and products that these artists make. From my perspective as a researcher, this complicates the ideas that these artists experience complete control, freedom, and independence over their art and their work, free from external restrictions.

Number of artists vs. Type of Patreon reward

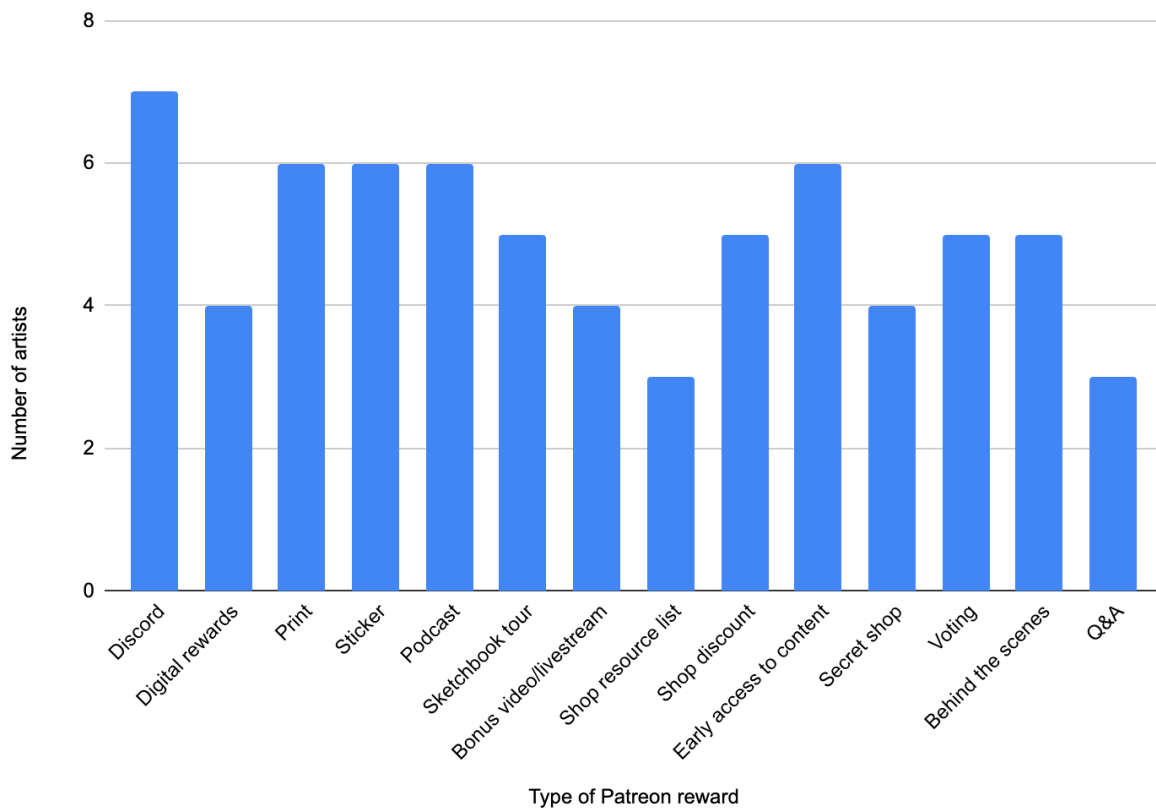


Figure 2.1 Graph showing the popularity of different types of Patreon rewards that artists would offer to their Patrons each month as of April 2023. There is significant overlap between what the artists provide. Source: Patreon.³²

Social media platforms additionally have an impact on how "relevant" artists are. In this context, being "relevant" refers to being current, interesting, and compelling to potential customers. In other words, it is about maintaining some visibility and popularity so that people are interested in one's work. Relevancy is partially determined by algorithms, because those shape the visibility of artists' social media posts and therefore their work. This contributes to

³² Digital rewards may include phone wallpapers or printable planning pages, etc. Shop resource lists contain information about tools artists use and companies they work with when running their online shops. Early access to content can look like the ability to watch a YouTube video on Patreon the day before it comes out on YouTube, for example. Secret shops are online shops that only Patrons have access to; they often contain leftover Patreon rewards from previous months.

artists feeling pressure to create more art and content. For example, Vivienne shared about her fear of becoming irrelevant in one YouTube video:

"I was sort of like constantly falling behind, and I felt like I was never making things fast enough and as a result, it's really warped my relationship with my art, which I know is not a unique problem for a lot of other, like, Internet illustrator people because the algorithm is not kind to us. It's not kind to people who like to work slow and who don't post every day. The fear of losing relevancy is ever-present...it's just the constant balance of, like, not losing your creativity and your desire to make things to the ravenous constant demands of social media, pretty much any social media platform nowadays" (Vivienne).

In this quote, Vivienne describes a tension between working the way she would like to work and succumbing to the pressure of working in ways that the social media platforms on which she posts reward creators. She also acknowledges how her art has been affected by social media.

Relatedly, Lauren discussed how relevancy is tied directly to her income in a YouTube video. "It's just like this huge fear of becoming irrelevant, and not having people care about your art anymore, and then poof your income just like goes like that, and then you just can't do this anymore. So there's that side of it [this job]...feeling the anxieties of...what if this just all goes away one day, like, out of nowhere and having that sort of be out of your control" (Lauren).³³

These two quotes also point to the way in which artists' control, freedom, and independence are affected by the social media platforms on which they post. This second quote from Lauren also shows the potential for their jobs to be unsustainable rather than sustainable, for the possibility of the relatively new social media platforms on which they post ceasing to exist on the Internet is real, as the demise of the social media site Vine in 2016-17 shows (Fiegerman 2017).

Finally, artists regularly shared about their experiences with burnout on their social media accounts, including in their YouTube videos. As this will be covered extensively in Chapter 3, I will just note here that in artists' descriptions of burnout, they usually attribute it to over-working

³³ Relevancy is also tied to temporality in that it is linked to how often the artists are producing new content. For the platforms, this results in increased clicks and opportunities for advertising.

and speak about it as having an impact on their emotional well-being, happiness, and creative processes.

In sum, social media algorithms, the uncertainty surrounding how artists' online content will perform, the fear of losing relevancy on social media, content genres, and burnout affect artists' control over their work, freedom, independence, the potential of their jobs to be sustainable, the kinds of art and content they make, and their happiness. When contrasted with their descriptions of self-employment as something that offers them control, independence, freedom, and the ability to create a sustainable job and pursue creativity and happiness, this becomes paradoxical. I want to make sure to reiterate here that while I am arguing that this paradox exists, I am also arguing that both of these sides to the paradox need to be considered; both speak to these artists' experiences with self-employment and one does not negate the other. The goal here is to discuss the messiness and complexity of self-employment and neoliberal subjectivities on social media by using artists' accounts of their own experiences. The next section will continue this line of thought and explore more of the context and broader picture behind this paradox.

Who benefits from these neoliberal logics around self-employment?

As has been argued above, some of the benefits of self-employment perceived by the artists become paradoxical when we consider that the social media platforms on which they work make their profits³⁴ by shaping the artists' work practices and the products and art that they

³⁴ Another way to describe this is through the concept of value creation. Value, or profit, is generated by artists' labor and benefits not only themselves but also the social media platforms on which they post. The value is located in the online content that they produce, which, when viewed by others, provides the social media companies with more user data. Significantly, this content is shaped by algorithmic logics that are governed by the social media platforms. While my data does not provide an answer to the question of who owns the content that is the site of the production of value, what remains clear is that once the content is posted, artists' control over it decreases. This relationship between the artist and social media platform in terms of the ownership of content is a compelling topic for further research. For more information, see Robert Foster's essay "Commodities, Brands, Love and Kula: Comparative Notes on

produce. Therefore, it is important to question who benefits from the artists perceiving these perks of self-employment. In the case and scope of this research project, I will argue that it is in the interest of the social media platforms on which the artists post that they believe in these benefits of self-employment.

David Harvey argues that neoliberalism is "a project to achieve the restoration of class power" and that "increasing social inequality [has] in fact been...structural to the whole project" (Harvey 2005 16). In order for this project to come to fruition, it follows that a larger population than the wealthiest class support it. This is where neoliberal ideology comes into play, as a "conceptual apparatus" that aligns itself with personal values such that it becomes "so embedded in common sense as to be taken for granted" (Harvey 2005 5).

In his work about trucking, Steve Viscelli provides a compelling analysis about how employers take action to "gain advantage over workers" through ideas around freedom and the American dream, resulting in the kind of inequality Harvey describes (Viscelli 2016 26-27). For instance, he draws from ads to demonstrate how the information truckers receive from their employers about independent contracting influences them to believe that contracting, which usually involves leasing and purchasing one's own truck, would be more financially advantageous than being an employee driver for a trucking company. In fact, independent contracting often "results in financial and personal disaster" (Viscelli 2016 108, 116-120). Ultimately, Viscelli argues that many truckers become contractors because they are "systematically influenced by a set of labor market institutions that favor the interests of employers" (Viscelli 2016 108). Employers benefit from hiring contractors because since

Value Creation." He "draws on the literature of 'commodity chains' to link together what he calls 'value creation' in production and consumption, arguing that this latter domain is increasingly important in the process of commodity 'branding', where purchasers are meant to form deep emotional relations with commodities, investing them with themselves and, in turn, enhancing their capacity to stand as unique kinds of objects" (Pedersen 2008 6).

contractors are self-employed, they "do not receive employer-paid health and retirement benefits, nor do they require employer contributions to Social Security and Medicare or worker's compensation," contractors "own their trucks and pay for fuel, maintenance, and insurance," contractors are "under greater pressure than employees to accept whatever work is offered to them," and they are "seen as less likely and able to unionize" (Viscelli 2016 111-112). Viscelli's work points to the way in which trucking companies profit from truckers believing in the perceived benefits of independent contracting, widening the power imbalance and inequality between the employers and the workers.

While the social media platforms on which artists post are not their employers in the way that trucking companies are for employee drivers, they still can influence how they work and their views around self-employment. For example, on the Patreon home page, this text is shown: "Who uses Patreon? Hundreds of thousands of video creators, podcasters, musicians, writers, gamers, and more are achieving creative and financial freedom doing what they love on Patreon" (Patreon, n.d.). This statement exemplifies the idea that pursuing self-employment online, specifically on Patreon, allows one to realize their creative potential and experience freedom through their work. Another example can be found on YouTube's "Welcome, Creators" page. The messages there include: "Creators are what make YouTube...well, YouTube. We may supply the stage, but the ideas, stories, and vision are all yours. Meet Creators who have found and built their own path on YouTube, and learn how you can get started on your own," and "Every tool, filter, and format was built to help Creators unleash their creativity, tell their story, and connect with fans across the world" (YouTube Creators, n.d.). Like the Patreon example, these excerpts emphasize the idea that YouTube can help users be creative, freely express themselves, and develop an individualized brand.

By incorporating these logics about freedom and creativity into their websites, platforms like YouTube and Patreon help to spread them. These ideas that, as Harvey outlines, appeal to "our intuitions and instincts, to our values and our desires" also spread from the artists themselves to their viewers (Harvey 2005 5). Through freely sharing information about how they became "Internet art people," as well as publicly sharing ideas like that they love how much control they have over their work, artists communicate to their viewers that they too can (or should) pursue a self-employed career online. One example of this is shown in Bea's quote, which opened this chapter. She referenced four artists she saw on social media when discussing why she decided to pursue a self-employed artistic career herself. She said that those artists showed her that "being an artist online was possible" (Bea).

The more people there are creating online content, the more people there are to collect data about and the more ads there are to show to viewers. YouTube, which is owned by Google, profits from data collection, as well as ad revenue. Andrejevic argues that YouTube "is doing all it can to transform the site from a community of video sharing into a revenue machine" by cultivating "an interactive media environment in which every action of users can be captured and put to work by marketers and advertisers" (Andrejevic 2009 410). One of the ways this is shown is through the numerous privacy law violations they have been convicted of in the past decade (Federal Trade Commission 2019).³⁵

Patreon also generates revenue the more Patreon accounts and the more Patrons of those Patreon accounts there are. The following example that illustrates this point is taken from Bea's 2020 YouTube video about Patreon. While I recognize that it is an older video, I think that the information she provides still helps to give an idea about the fees Patreon charges its users. "The

³⁵ See "Google and YouTube Will Pay Record \$170 Million for Alleged Violations of Children's Privacy Law: FTC, New York Attorney General allege YouTube channels collected kids' personal information without parental consent" article on the FTC website for more information.

first month I had Patreon [in 2017] when I was making \$261, I was actually making \$291, but they took \$15 for processing fees and \$15 for platform fees (Figure 2.2). In relation to that, last month I was making \$6944 and they took a little over \$600 from that for processing and platform (Figure 2.3) so it does get pretty hefty as you start to make more on the platform" (Bea). As this explanation shows, the more money the artist running the Patreon account makes, the more money Patreon itself makes.³⁶

Bea's Monthly Patreon Income and Fees

July 2017

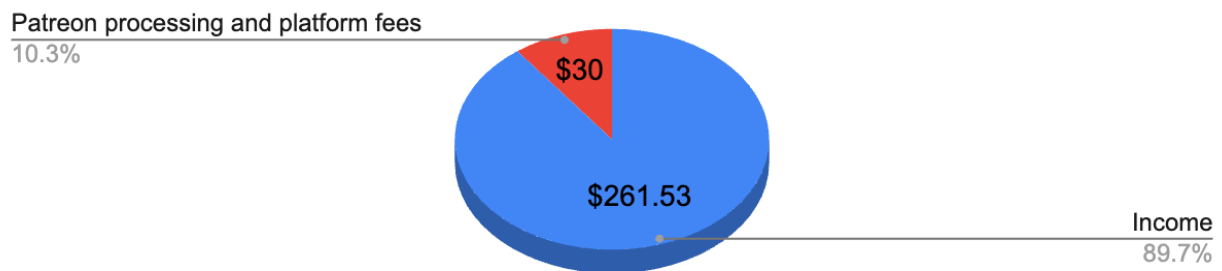


Figure 2.2 Pie chart showing how much Bea made on Patreon in July 2017 and the fees Patreon charged. Patreon fees comprised approximately 10% of Bea's income. Source: YouTube.

³⁶ This example shows the difference between when the value created by an artist's labor is for the artist themselves, and when it allows the platform to make a profit.

Bea's Monthly Patreon Income and Fees

August 2020

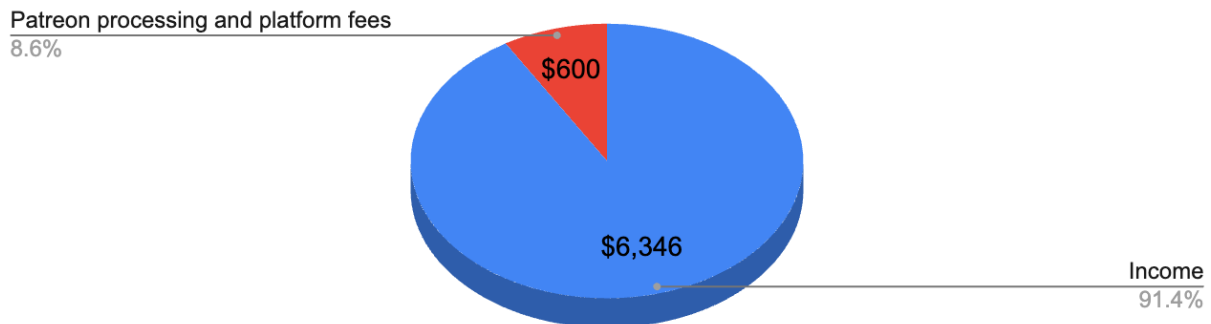


Figure 2.3 Pie chart showing how much Bea made on Patreon in August 2020 and the fees Patreon charged. Patreon fees comprised approximately 9% of Bea's income. Source: YouTube.

In sum, the ideas that self-employment offers control, freedom, independence, and the opportunity to express one's creativity and pursue happiness emphasize positive aspects and potential benefits of self-employment. While elements of these ideas may hold true to creators' experiences, it is also important to acknowledge the ways in which artists' control, freedom, and independence, for example, are limited and affected by the platforms on which they work and post. Significantly, these platforms espouse messages that reflect neoliberal ideology on their webpages and profit from users believing these logics. Neoliberalism is fundamentally about class relations and exacerbating inequalities so that economic elites, such as the owners of social media platforms, profit while workers and users of those platforms remain exploited. In other words, while neoliberalism emphasizes positive values surrounding work, it also at the same time positions people within an economic and class structure. The experiences of visual artists working within this class structure and especially their experiences with burnout, alienation, and precarity will be the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Burnout, Alienation, and Precarity

In a collaboration YouTube video with another artist, Vivienne reflected on her experiences with burnout:

"When I first basically started making things online full-time, I was staying up until, like, 4am every night packing orders. And I did that for, like, two months, and then I basically spent all of January and February - so I spent, like, the next two months lying in bed because I was completely burnt out. And then, basically, I have never found a long-term sustainable rhythm, so I basically, like, I find something that, like, feels pretty okay, and it works for like a month or two. And then, before I know it, I have, like, way too much on my plate again, and I'm doing way too many things, and then I crash and burn, and then I'm silent for a month, and then I start picking [everything] up again. And I'll be, like, oh, it's gonna be different this time, and I just sort of keep repeating, and it turns into this like weird vicious cycle. And I think that, like, if you do not find a rhythm and find a system that is sustainable in the long term in regards to your creativity as well as your - just, like, your creative output, uh, your career will be much much shorter than it should be because like you're gonna hit a wall. And you'll keep getting back up, but eventually there will be a wall that you hit that you will not be able to recover from" (Vivienne).

In this excerpt, Vivienne describes how burnout, which I define as extreme work-related exhaustion and fatigue to the extent that one is no longer able to work, is a phenomenon that is cyclical. For her, it is caused by over-working and having too many work obligations and results in periods of "silence," or inactivity on social media or generally online. She argues that finding a sustainable routine is imperative for solving burnout because it can be career-ending. The concept of burnout, its causes, and potential solutions for it were key topics in many of the YouTube videos included in this research. Its prevalence among the artists I followed for this project marks it as a central issue and commonly experienced negative aspect of their jobs as self-employed Internet art people.

In Chapter 2, I focused on some of the perceived perks of self-employment online. This chapter will serve as its complement. I will discuss three main cons of self-employment, as experienced by these artists: burnout, alienation and precarity. I will argue that while each of

these are spoken about online as personal problems, they are in fact systemic issues.

Neoliberalism, which in this chapter refers to a system that impacts the material realities of these artists who work online, is involved in artists' experiences of burnout, alienation, and precarity. I will also argue that the social media platforms on which the artists post profit from their experiencing these work conditions.

Burnout

In one of her YouTube videos, Lauren describes her recent experiences with burnout.

"In a couple minutes, you're going to hear me talk about burnout...in my past few videos I've noticed that I've been talking a lot about stress and burnout and I don't think that I ever fully recovered...the more I've been working [it] is just kind of slowly been getting worse and I do things like I-I go for walks I-you know, take breaks but I don't know, I just feel like I've been burning out slowly and ceramics plus this shop update just like really kicked my ass...and it's weird like it-it happens under my nose. Like I said, I try to take breaks and just be mindful of how I'm feeling. I go on so many walks, I don't work weekends, I don't work late, but it's still just not felt like enough" (Lauren).

A key part of this quote is when Lauren says that it seems like burnout happens "under her nose."

This presents an important question when taken with the analysis presented in Chapter 2. One of the alleged benefits of self-employment discussed there was the ability to have control over one's work. Several limitations of artists' control over their work were covered in that chapter, and burnout is another one. This is because it presents a contradiction: if artists truly have complete control over what and how they work, why would they burn out? I will argue below that this shows that there are systemic forces at work beyond the artists' individual choices about their jobs.

Significantly, burnout is discussed as "personal trouble" on social media, to borrow terminology from C. Wright Mills (Mills and Gitlin 2000 8). In the quote above, Lauren has attempted to address her burnout by getting regular physical activity and limiting her work days

and hours are individual solution strategies that place the responsibility of dealing with burnout on the individual artist.³⁷ In another example, Vivienne reflected on her burnout during a podcast episode:

"I was trying to do everything...And I hit, like, a full on breaking point, and I kind of had to just, like, I had to, like, email all my YouTube sponsors. I had to like get in contact with like a bunch of people and be like, hey, I can't do this. And I, like, I had to put everything on hold basically for like a month. And it felt - there was, like, so much shame and guilt tied up around it because I was just, like, these people that I was, like, these people have been waiting on things. I've signed contracts with these people. Like I'm such a disappointment. I have failed in such, like, a huge monumental way" (Vivienne).

In this example, Vivienne describes how burning out and having to stop posting sponsored videos, for instance, involved feelings of failure.

Jaffe writes that "the ideals of freedom and choice that neoliberalism claims to embrace function, paradoxically, as a mechanism for justifying inequality. The choice is yours, but so are the costs for choosing wrong... This kind of freedom, as political theorist Adam Kotsko wrote, is also a trap, an 'apparatus for generating blameworthiness'...your situation in life must be the result of choices that you made, and thus no one else has any reason to sympathize, let alone to help, if you fall." She goes on to provide an example, pointing to the way that people hop from one job to another seeking a position that doesn't make them miserable because they are told that if they feel miserable in a job, it is their fault (Jaffe 2021 8).³⁸ Vivienne's description of burnout is similarly individualizing; the burnout she is experiencing in her work and the repercussions from it are framed as her fault. Significantly, as Jaffe's quote also shows, neoliberal rhetoric is

³⁷ See Chapter 4 for more information about individual solutions to adverse work conditions.

³⁸ This example is not about self-employed individuals like the artists in this thesis. The fact that the artists are self-employed likely increases the chances that they will blame themselves for burning out because though they do work with others such as sponsoring companies and clients, they are their own bosses, making it challenging to blame other parties.

involved in the placing of blame on the individual worker for their undesirable work conditions and experiences.

While artists speak about burnout as a personal trouble on social media, I will demonstrate how it is a "public issue," to borrow once again from C. Wright Mills. One of the ways this is shown is through the point that it is not a unique experience to any one particular artist involved in this research, and was spoken about, often at length, by over half of the artists I followed. Importantly, burnout is not limited to this niche group of artists either, as Funahashi's work on occupational burnout rehabilitation centers in Finland and Amirebrahimi's work on burnout in Silicon Valley show (Funahashi 2013, Amirebrahimi 2017).

Additionally, burnout's cyclical nature points to the way in which artists are repeatedly subjected to pressures to work and be productive.³⁹ As Spence writes, this kind of pressure is central to the experience of working under conditions of neoliberalism. "Under the neoliberal turn arguably the most important figure is the figure who consistently works" (Spence 2020 11). Spence demonstrates that the drive to be productive, while it may be internalized, is enforced through neoliberalism. This is not only because productivity is valued in neoliberal ideology but also because, through economic policies, neoliberalism requires intensified productivity to become integral to individuals' material survival. He goes on to say that "in order to consistently provide for his mother, his child, as well as himself, Ace Hood has to be consistently working. Has to be consistently productive" (Spence 2020 11).

Importantly, Lauren addressed this issue in a YouTube video devoted to "hustle culture."

"I made a comic art piece recently about hustle culture and I've just been thinking about how while I'm aware of it, and I know I'm against it, and I talk a lot about disregarding productivity, I still fall into it really easily. I found this article that explains what hustle culture is because some people, like, commented [and] asked

³⁹ Another way to describe this cause and effect relationship is that demands for innovation and pressure to maintain a relevant, or current, status on social media contribute to burnout.

me what it was, and I think the article does a really great job of explaining what it is. Here's two quotes from it: 'Fundamentally, hustle culture is about work dominating your time in such an unnatural way that we have no time to live our lives...it's a lifestyle where career has become such a priority in your life or the environment that you work in that other aspects of being human such as hobbies, family time, and self-care often take a back seat.' 'Hustle culture carries this overarching belief that the more you do, the more valuable you are. Busier always equals better, constant business will always lead to...more money, prestige, happiness, and high self-esteem'" (Lauren).

Neoliberal ideas about work can be clearly seen in the quotes from the article Lauren cited. For example, when she is speaking about the way in which hobbies and personal relationships often become deprioritized due to the demands of work/hustle culture, this is reminiscent of arguments that Jaffe made about neoliberalism in her work. She writes that "a side effect of all this love for work has been that talking about love between people has lost its importance...instead, our personal relationships are to be squeezed in around the edges, fitted into busy schedules, or sacrificed entirely to the demands of the workplace" (Jaffe 2021 326). Additionally, Lauren's acknowledgement of how pervasive pressures to hustle are not only point to neoliberalism, but also to a generally larger force beyond the individual, showing that burnout is a public issue rather than a personal trouble.

Another way in which neoliberalism is involved in artists' experiences with burnout comes through YouTube's invitation for them to join the platform in the first place. As has been argued in Chapter 2, it is in the social media platforms' best interests (and capitalism's at large) to allow subjects to believe in their 'freedoms,' which, as Althusser writes in his work about Ideological State Apparatuses, is just the freedom to 'accept...subjection.' Through (neoliberal) ideology, individual subjects are 'invited' to 'freely' submit, resulting in a group of 'good subjects' who 'work by themselves' and do not require the intervention of the Repressive State Apparatus, the state, to force them to work (Althusser 1971). An example of this kind of invitation can be

found on YouTube. Siciliano writes that "control over creative labor begins with an invitation. YouTube invites users to produce, to create and express, to 'be yourself.'" He goes on to describe how "YouTube's seemingly open invitation, however, contains attempts to control or discipline creators" through the way that the interface is constructed, through "educational materials [that YouTube distributes] that inform creators of 'best practices,'" through copyright law, and through YouTube's "community" guidelines (Siciliano 2021 143).⁴⁰ This is reminiscent of the way that Althusser describes freedom and the underlying mechanisms of control that lie beneath that term. The "freedom" attached to being self-employed appears less free, and burnout appears less like an individual issue, when the imposed pressure to constantly work, and therefore burnout, is exposed.

I would like to briefly address the ways in which social media platforms not only benefit from artists believing in their freedoms, but also overworking. In this section, I have used the term "overwork" somewhat interchangeably with burnout. If artists are overworking or are overworked, it follows that they are devoting a significant amount of their time and energy to their work and likely producing a substantial amount of content to post on their social media platforms. As has been argued in Chapter 2, social media platforms benefit from creators' constant production of content because they profit off of user data. Therefore, it follows that it is in their interest that artists and other creators work to their limit (and also post videos about working to their limit and burning out). However, while the platforms profit off of the period of high intensity work that comes before burnout, they do not profit from artists no longer posting content when they do burn out.

⁴⁰ According to Andrejevic, this invitation also includes promises made by the "interactive economic model" that YouTube ascribes to, namely "to return to producers control over their creative activity." However, this promise is merely performative, as this model "balks at the prospect of relinquishing control over the relationship between content and advertising" (Andrejevic 2009 419).

Finally, I would like to propose that if burnout is in fact a systemic issue rather than a personal problem, questioning the term itself is important. Burnout implies that, like a candle, one can simply strike a new match and relight the flame, or, if necessary, add more wax or replace the wick. It does not imply that anything about the environment within which the candle is burning must change, only that the individual candle must accommodate the environment. Significantly, burnout is a regular outcome of capitalism and the intensified labor that contributes to it is a hallmark of neoliberalism in particular. The term burnout doesn't speak to these origins but instead makes it personal about the worker. Perhaps a different term could point more accurately to the systemic nature of burnout; replacing elements of the candle, to continue with this analogy, will not change the fact that the candle is burning out because it is burning right next to a furnace, for example. In the case of artists working online, burnout in the workplace occurs in large part due to the system in which they are working, which extends beyond the social media platforms on which they post to the systems of neoliberalism and capitalism that impact their lives.

Alienation

In addition to burnout, artists also experience alienation, or estrangement, from the content that they produce and post online as part of their work. Importantly, however, burnout and alienation are related, as one artist pointed to creating content as something that contributes to her burnout. In her interview, Vivienne said "one of the reasons why I got burnt out with YouTube is because I realized that I was making art for the sake of making content about it, um, as opposed to the content being secondary to the work that I was making. Um, I also had to meet, like, sponsorship deadlines and stuff like this. So it felt like - it felt like my creativity and my creative practice was being reduced for the sake of making videos, making, uh, sponsorship

spots, and all of this stuff, which which felt really bad" (Vivienne). In this section, I will show that artists' negative connotations with content stem from their content being alienating to them and demonstrate that undesirable experiences with content are not a personal trouble but a public issue.

In Vivienne's quote, she discusses the way in which making content can feel "reductive." This was something that she also noticed other artists speaking about. In one of her YouTube videos, she said, "there's been some talk in...my different art communities on all the different platforms I'm on, of artists not really being enjoyed being called content creators because they're like, 'my art is not content'...And I think that, sometimes, the word 'content' can be kind of -- I think it's turning into something that's, like, rather reductive and feels very, like, commercial and stuff because you think about how you have to create content for brand engagement" (Vivienne). While Vivienne did not feel that this spoke accurately to her experience, the fact that this sentiment has been expressed by other artists and illustrators she knows remains important and shows the extent to which it is a larger issue that is not limited to one individual. Additionally, what she describes exemplifies Marx and Engels' concept of estranged labor. "The object which labour produces - labour's product - confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer" (Tucker et al. 1978 71). In the case of artists, the object that their labor produces, for example a piece of online content about their art, can confront them as alien in that it takes on a life of its own on social media platforms governed by algorithms that are out of the artists' control.

Vivienne also discusses the importance of prioritizing art over content, rather than content over art, in the first quote. This places the task of maintaining those priorities on the individual artist. As she goes on to say, "I think as long as you keep your kind of values straight

and you keep like, what really matters to you, um, kind of in the forefront, then, uh, making content around it comes a little bit easier" (Vivienne). Again, this individualized responsibility is related to the belief that self-employment allows one to have complete control over one's work, which is a logic that reflects neoliberal ideology. This masks the realities of working under conditions of capitalism and neoliberalism, where control over one's work is limited. As Jaffe writes, "the concept of alienation...[is] about whether you have the power to decide where and how hard you will work, and whether you will control the thing you make or the service you provide" (Jaffe 2021 10). As is shown by the impact that social media algorithms have on the response artists receive to their content, the amount of control that artists have over what they make is restricted.

Significantly, artists not only create content about their art, but also about their personal lives.⁴¹ For example, Bea uploaded an Instagram post that consisted of 10 pictures of herself in the mirror, occasionally with her dog, with the caption: "The collection of fit pic everyone has been waiting for ft. my bff Noah (*~*)" (Bea). Therefore, alienation from content not only involves alienation from art, but also alienation from the self, to a certain extent. As Marx and Engels write, self-estrangement, or alienation from the self, is "the relation of the worker to his own activity as an alien activity not belonging to him...as an activity which has turned against him, neither depends on nor belongs to him" (Tucker et al. 1978 75). Fuchs and Sevignani build on this point, writing that "labour is a necessarily alienated form of work, in which humans do not control and own the means and results of production" (Fuchs and Sevignani 2013 240). For artists who work on social media, while they may own, for example, the paints that they use to

⁴¹ This differentiates these artists from other types of influencers and entertainers. Lukács' book, *Invisibility by Design: Women and Labor in Japan's Digital Economy*, for example, focuses on "photographers, net idols, bloggers, online traders, and cell phone novelists" (Lukács 2020 2). As the term artist implies, the artists in this thesis create art as part of their work, not only content. Significantly, art is another aspect of this topic that is not discussed by the literature on neoliberalism referenced in this thesis.

develop a painting for a Patreon art print, they do not control the fate of the pieces of content that they make about it on Instagram.

Relatedly, Haber discusses Thrift's concept of "knowing capitalism," defined as when "capitalism began to intervene in, and make a business out of, thinking the everyday" (Haber 2017 396). Everyday practices artists engage in, not only including making art, distributing art, and planning new art projects, but also activities like cooking⁴² that exist outside the obligations of their work, thus become co-opted through capitalism when they create content around it.⁴³ This ultimately results in alienation. Velthuis references Hauser in his article, writing that "market exchange would alienate the artist from his own labor, his art, as well as his public. It would harm the intimate, emotional relationship an artist has with the art he makes, as well as with the audience that looks at it" (Velthuis 2005 24). This quote reflects Vivienne's sentiment that creating content has damaged her relationship with her art and her work.

The monetization of not only one's creative passions, but also of the self through the production of content around leisure activities, hobbies, cooking, fashion, etc., as I often took fieldnotes on throughout my research, shows the pervasiveness of the pressure to consistently produce work and content. As was argued in the section about burnout, artists working constantly benefits the social media platforms on which they post. The pressure to do so not only stems from the platforms, but also but the larger systems of capitalism and neoliberalism. This additionally shows the extent to which alienation from one's content is not a personal failure, but a much broader issue.

⁴² This is an example of social reproduction becoming social media content.

⁴³ For more information on the collapse of leisure and work, see the "A note on the literature: work, play, and hobbies" section of the Introduction.

Precarity

Finally, artists also spoke about experiencing precarity, or job instability, in their YouTube videos. Throughout this section, I will discuss the various forms of precarity that artists referenced online including employment insecurity, job insecurity, work insecurity, and representation insecurity. I will argue that the involvement of neoliberalism in their experiences with these shows how precarity is not a personal issue, but a systemic one.

Standing defines the precariat as a group consisting of "people who lack the seven forms of labour-related security...that social democrats, labour parties, and trades unions pursued as their 'industrial citizenship' agenda after the Second World War" (Standing 2011 16-17). While there are aspects of Standing's assessment of the precariat that do not neatly map onto this group of artists, I will draw from the forms of labor security Standing uses to help define precarity.⁴⁴ I will argue that artists do not experience four out of the seven types of labor security he outlines, including employment security, work security, income security, and representation security. The other forms of labor security are skill reproduction security, labor market security, and job security.

He defines employment security as "protection against arbitrary dismissal, regulations on hiring and firing, imposition of costs on employers for failing to adhere to rules and so on" (Standing 2011 17). For artists who work online, dismissal from their positions can depend on the sustained interest of their audience members. In one of her YouTube videos, Gabriela said "what if this [her career] is all, like, taken away especially because we rely so much on people's, like, attention span and stuff that - it can all be taken away so quickly because people can just,

⁴⁴ This is another area where this topic goes beyond the terms and categories that the theoretical interlocutors I am referencing propose. The agency and precarity that these artists' and other self-employed individuals in similar positions to them have is a valuable subject worth further research.

like, decide to not really care about your art anymore" (Gabriela). In addition to dependence on audience interest, artists are also dependent on the social media platforms that they post for income and traffic to their Patreon pages. They ultimately do not have control over the continued existence of those platforms, which cater to and are used by many groups of creators and users beyond the artists themselves. As a result, artists could effectively be "dismissed" through the termination of one of these social media platforms. In one of her YouTube videos, Amy discussed this. "I've always been told, like, you can't trust social media because one day it could be gone. Then, where are people gonna find you?" (Amy).

Standing describes work security as "protection against accidents and illness at work, through, for example, safety and health regulations, limits on working time, unsociable hours, night work for women, as well as compensation for mishaps" (Standing 2011 17). Because the artists are self-employed, the social media platforms on which they post do not regulate their work in the ways that are described in Standing's definition. Not only are there no safety and health regulations, for example, but artists are also not provided with health insurance, as Lauren, Bea, and others shared on their YouTube channels. Additionally, limits on working time and vacation time, for example, are not imposed on them by the platforms, but are rather self-imposed (e.g. Lauren's four day work week).

Next, Standing defines income security as "assurance of an adequate stable income, protected through, for example, minimum wage machinery, wage indexation, comprehensive social security, progressive taxation to reduce inequality and to supplement low incomes" (Standing 2011 17). In one of her YouTube videos, Lauren named "unstable income" as a con of being self-employed (Lauren). Additionally, social media algorithms greatly impact the visibility and reception of artists' work online. These algorithms can change and be volatile, affecting the

stability of artists' incomes.⁴⁵ Additionally, Patreon is a significant source of income for most of the artists included in this research. However, Patrons can unsubscribe from artists' pages at any time, which adds a level of instability to that source of revenue.

Lastly, Standing writes of representation security as "possessing a collective voice in the labour market, through, for example, independent trade unions, with a right to strike" (Standing 2011 17). I did not document any union participation or the existence of a relevant union that artists could join throughout my research. I also did not learn of any social media platform-specific union for a larger group of creators, or hear of any social media platform strikes.

Artists experiencing these four types of labor insecurity shows that they experience precarity as a negative aspect of their work. Significantly, Standings work on and what these artists have in common with "the precariat," or a group of people that experience various forms of precarity and consist of "the teenager who flits in and out of the internet café while surviving on fleeting jobs," "the migrant who uses his wits to survive," "the single mother fretting where the money for next week's food bill is coming from," "the man in his 60s who takes casual jobs to help pay medical bills" and many more (Standing 2011 22), shows the extent to which precarity is not a result of personal failure but is a more widespread issue.

The fact that neoliberalism is involved in artists' experiences with precarity also shows it to be something that extends beyond the realm of the individual. For example, Jaffe describes how neoliberalism has shifted workers' priorities when it comes to labor securities. Today's "labor of love ethic," in which one is supposed to find love and purpose through work, differs from the "industrial work ethic" that was influential during Fordism in the early 20th century.

⁴⁵ As a result, algorithms shape the labor practices that artists engage in. For more information about this, see the "How do social media platforms affect artists' work?" section from Chapter 1.

This ethic promised perks to workers like weekends off, vacation time, and benefits and was "the era of the family wage" (Jaffe 2021 12). Today, as Jaffe writes, job security and pensions have been "traded for fulfillment" (Jaffe 2021 12). As has been shown above, artists have discussed how they do not experience various forms of job security, and I did not document anyone speaking about pensions. Artists do, however, share about the love they experience for their jobs alongside their anxieties that result from this insecurity/precarity. Gabriela spoke about this in one of her videos:

"The work that I do, because I love it - I love it so much. It's so fun and I care so much about it but it has gotten to the point where I am anxious about it ending...it is probably not going to be my job for the next 20-30 years. It is more than likely going to evolve and change, and it may look completely different three years from now - two years from now, you know, maybe the focus won't be as much Youtube and Patreon, maybe I'll start really taking up client work. So kind of just like settling into the idea of change happens and accepting it" (Gabriela).

In this example, Gabriela weighs the uncertainty about the future of her work and her job against her love for it, ultimately settling on accepting the precarity in favor of continuing a career she loves for as long as it will last, exemplifying Jaffe's argument from above.

Social media platforms benefit from the artists who post on them experiencing forms of precarity. As capitalist enterprises, social media platforms are committed to the production of profit, and artists experiencing precarity allows social media platforms to increase their profits and is an effect of the platforms' pursuits of profit. By freely sharing information about how they came to earn money online and become self-employed, as well as publicly sharing ideas such as they love how much control they have over their work, artists show their audience members that they can also pursue a self-employed career online. Pursuing the kind of self-employment that these artists have, however, involves getting benefits that could have been sourced from an employer, such as health insurance, on one's own. This allows social media platforms to save

money on said benefits. As was mentioned above, these workers are also not unionized. Marx discusses this kind of "freedom" to work, writing that "to become a free seller of labour-power, who carries his commodity wherever he can find a market for it, he must further have escaped from the regime of the guilds, their rules for apprentices and journeymen, and their restrictive labour regulations" (Tucker et al. 1978 875). While guilds are not the same as unions, this quote still speaks to the way that, through selling their labor-power under capitalism, which refers to the energy and ability of a person to work or their capacity to work, workers can freelance and be "freed" of the work-related rules and laws that govern other workplaces. For self-employed artists who work online under conditions of capitalism today, they are "freed" through self-employment from the restrictions or rules that can come with working directly for one employer, as well as the laws that stipulate that certain employers must provide benefits like health insurance for their employees. This kind of "freedom from" rather than "freedom to," to borrow terminology from Jaffe, is actually precarity, as has been shown above. Additionally this kind of obscuring of repression through the language of freedom is a hallmark of contemporary neoliberal rhetoric in particular.

Before concluding this chapter, I would like to make a brief note about the socio-economic status of the artists involved in this research. Their incomes can vary widely depending on the length of time they have spent on social media. As was discussed in Chapter 1, artists' Patreons vary from the tens to the thousands of Patrons, resulting in vastly different amounts of revenue from that site alone (Figure 3.1). Significantly, artists who have spent more years on social media tend to have higher numbers of Patrons. Additionally, artists' Instagram followings and YouTube subscriber counts vary (Figure 3.2). Therefore, it is likely that artists' experiences with income precarity, for example, may depend on the length of time they have

spent on social media and/or on Patreon. While I do not know the specifics about any of the artists' income levels, I feel it is important to acknowledge the likely variability among them.

Years on Patreon vs. Number of Patrons

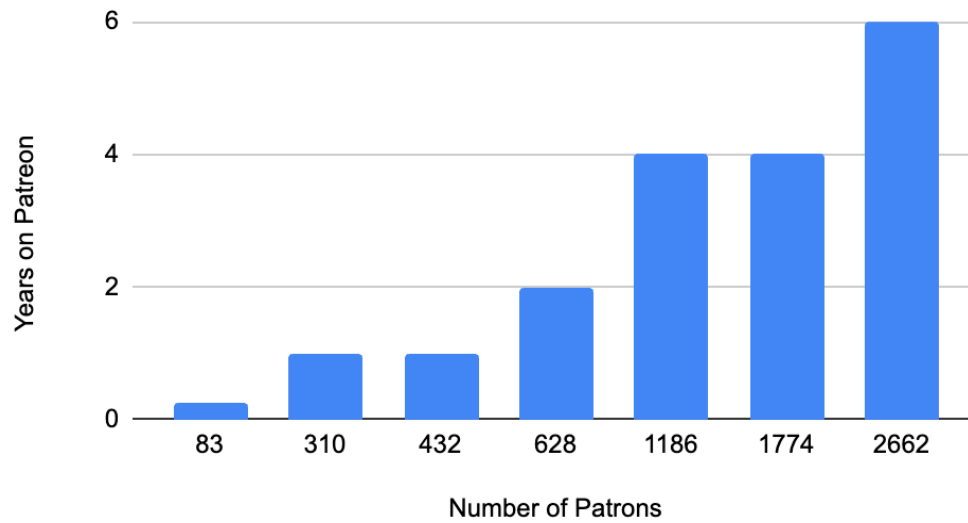


Figure 3.1 Graph showing the number of Patrons artists have on their Patreon pages compared to the number of years since the creation of their Patreon accounts as of June 2022. There is an overall trend where artists who have been on Patreon for more years have higher numbers of Patrons. Source: Patreon.

Number of YouTube subscribers and Instagram followers

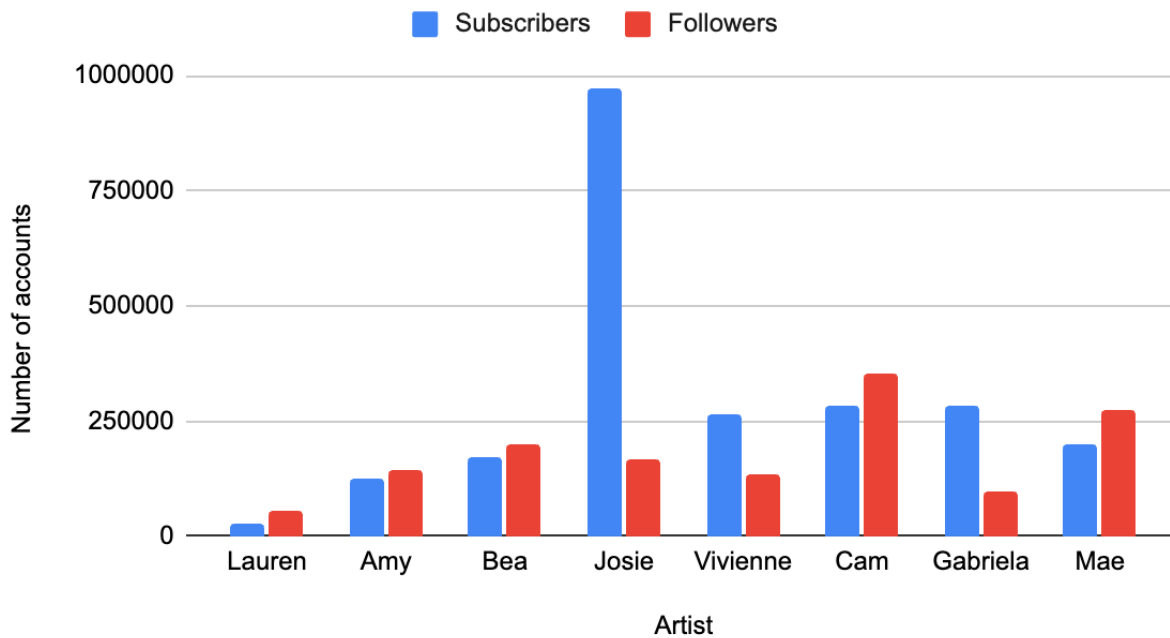


Figure 3.2 Graph showing the numbers of YouTube subscribers and Instagram followers of each artist's main account and channel as of June 2022. Sources: YouTube and Instagram.

In conclusion, artists share not only about their love for their work and the perceived perks of their jobs in their content, but also about the cons or negative aspects as well. While there were several other cons that I noted artists speaking about online, including difficult taxes, the three major ones focused on in this chapter are burnout, alienation, and precarity. While each of these are framed as personal troubles, they are in fact systemic issues that extend beyond the individual artist's responsibility, as is shown by the role of neoliberalism plays in each of them. Importantly, the social media platforms on which the artists post benefit from their experiencing these work conditions. Finally, I argue that it is important to acknowledge that artists' incomes may vary widely depending on the length of time they have worked online or posted on social media, affecting their experiences with precarity. In the next chapter, we will turn to how artists

have responded to these cons of their jobs, what kinds of solutions they have implemented, and how those reflect neoliberal ideology.

Chapter 4: Artists' Responses and Solutions

In addition to describing her experiences with burnout and defining hustle culture, Lauren describes a potential solution for burnout in one of her YouTube videos.

"But this is not just gonna be a voiceover [of] me complaining. I do have a plan. I have a really great therapist, and we've been talking about ways to help me with my burnout. I mentioned that I'm kind of interested in trying out a four day work week and she was just like, 'Do it!' and it's great, and she explained to me, you know, you need one day to do errands and things in your personal life, like groceries, another to be social, go see a friend/do an activity, and then another day to just totally chill out. And I really felt that because I felt like weekends just aren't enough time for me to rest and recover, so in addition to trying to take more time off to myself, taking more breaks during the day, I think implementing the four day work week can help me just have more time and feel less overwhelmed and give me space to not overwork because that is my tendency" (Lauren).

In this excerpt, Lauren outlines the reasoning behind her decision to work four days out of each week instead of five. She points out that this can help her more fully recover between work weeks and pursue other activities on the weekends. This kind of solution for burnout that involves the individual artist adjusting their work schedule and/or work responsibilities was one I often found in my research. While several artists spoke openly about their burnout and referenced each other's videos when discussing it, I didn't see artists collaborating with each other to fix it. The fact that all their strategies involved self-reliance rather than collaboration again points to the entrenchment of neoliberal logics in discourse around work. The end of Lauren's quote points to this. She said that overworking was her tendency, pointing to herself and her choices surrounding her work as the cause of her burnout, rather than the systemic forces that contributed to it. Describing burnout as something that is her fault places the responsibility of solving it on her shoulders, rather than on everyone, not just artists, affected by capitalist alienation, precarity, and pressure to work constantly. Throughout the rest of this chapter, I will

discuss four solutions for burnout that these artists spoke about in their YouTube videos, as well as in interviews. These are:

1. Changing work obligations and schedule
2. Establishing or shifting boundaries between work and non-work
3. Self-care
4. Hiring assistants

While the boundaries between these sections are not rigid and several of these solutions overlap with one another, we will look at each of them in detail.

Changing work obligations and schedule

One of the solutions to burnout that artists regularly discussed was making adjustments to either the content of their workload or the size of their workload. While Lauren's four day work week is an example of the latter, other artists used different strategies. For example, in her interview, Vivienne shared about a recent change she made to her Patreon tiers.

"Just last month um, I actually stopped doing my Patreon printable. And so now my \$2 tier is more like a tip jar...I realized that doing the printable every month wasn't serving me. And it was always the thing at the end of the month that I was lagging on and that I was constantly falling behind on and I felt like it was getting in the way of everything...So I got rid of that sort of monthly obligation, which was also, like, as soon as I made that decision...it was, like, a huge weight off my shoulders, which was an indication that it was the right move" (Vivienne).

In this instance, Vivienne exercised the control she experiences as a self-employed individual over her work commitments to make her job more sustainable for her. As a result, she eliminated a work obligation that interfered with her other commitments and weighed on her.

Interestingly, Vivienne also spoke about how making changes to Patreon tiers and the prices on her online shop did not result in a loss of Patrons or a decrease in orders.

"My lowest tier used to be \$1...I was like, I'm doing a lot of work on this printable. I'm spending a lot of time on this printable every month. And so I was agonizing over bumping it up to \$2. And, like, that price bump pretty much went off without a hitch, with no resistance or no outcry... whenever I would raise my prices on my shop, I was always so scared that people were going to be furious... I think my biggest price jump was, like, I jumped my sticker sheets from, like, four to eight dollars because, um, I was outsourcing them [ordering them from a manufacturer rather than printing them all herself]. And they were of significantly higher quality. And frankly, I was also trying to increase my prices to try and lower the number of orders. I was getting to, like, try and keep it a little more manageable to, like, balance that out. That didn't happen. That didn't deter anyone" (Vivienne).

Because her shop orders did not decrease after her price change, Vivienne's workload did not decrease in the way that she had intended. This demonstrates a limit of these kinds of business-level solutions; they do not always yield the intended results.

Artists often brought up differences between how they ran their small businesses when they first started compared to how they run them now when speaking about the changes they have made to their business practices and schedule. Lauren discussed this at length in one of her YouTube videos. "I really want to start doing four shop updates a year. I feel like that's a really good schedule for me. When I first started this and I didn't have Patreon to fall back on, I would do a shop update every month which was so unsustainable, like, I burnt out so quickly because doing a shop update every month was just, like, so exhausting" (Lauren). Similarly, Vivienne discussed her experiences with extreme burnout and some of the adjustments she has made to her business since she started it in her interview.

"Back when I first opened my shop, I was very lucky that I already had, like, a built-in customer base, but I was getting maybe around like 40-50 orders a week. And I would hand write all of the envelopes. And I would hand write thank you notes for all of the orders. And I would wrap all of the orders in tissue paper and twine and send them off... which is just absurd to think about now. And I was staying up until like 4:00am, like 3:00-4:00am every night because I was like, I gotta make sure that I get these orders out... And so over the years, I basically just, um, kind of against my own will and sort of out of necessity learned that

there were certain things I had to sacrifice. I couldn't hand write thank you notes on every order. I couldn't handwrite the envelopes" (Vivienne).

These examples speak to the way that the artists make decisions about what to maintain, what to modify, and what to sacrifice in their work in order to ensure that they are not overworked.

Importantly, these choices are not entirely free, but are in part determined by what is important financially for them and what feels necessary to maintain so that their business can stay afloat.

Significantly, the emphasis on choice and individual responsibility in these solutions are hallmarks of neoliberal ideology. Lauren acknowledges this and the role of capitalism in a YouTube video when speaking about motivation. She said, "I feel like our capitalist society really like frowns upon being unmotivated. It's like that Nicki Minaj [video/audio] that's like, 'I hate lazy people,' but being unmotivated isn't always a personal failure" (Lauren). Here, she aptly points out that it isn't the fault of the workers themselves for not wanting to or not being able to work. Rather, capitalism requires workers to constantly work and demands that they want to work and have the personal capacities to work. However, she goes on to point to making individual changes in one's work as the solution for this, which aligns with neoliberal logics. "It could just be you trying to tell yourself what you're doing right now isn't working for you. So it's okay to reevaluate, it's okay to be like, hey, maybe running a small business isn't for me [or] hey, maybe what I'm selling isn't what I really want to do. So maybe sometimes instead of beating yourself up for being unmotivated, take that as an opportunity to reflect on what you're doing, what you aren't enjoying doing, and try to reorient things to make them work for you" (Lauren).

Importantly, artists adhering to these neoliberal ideas about individualism and work benefit the social media companies whose sites they use. These companies depend on high levels of engagement with their platforms because they profit from user data collection, as well as advertising. The longer creators can use the platforms, the more ads can be shown in and around

their content and the more data about viewers, as well as the artists themselves, can be collected. By allowing artists to attempt to make their careers sustainable and address some of the issues they experience while working on their own, the platforms are absolved from contributing to any of that work (to make working on the platforms sustainable) and therefore profit in multiple ways from the artists continuing to use their services.

Changing boundaries between work and non-work

Another strategy for dealing with burnout that artists shared in their YouTube videos was reconceptualizing the boundaries between their work and other aspects of their lives. For example, Josie devoted one of her YouTube videos to speaking to her viewers about the importance of making art for oneself.

"Especially when you're working in the creative industry and doing art as a job, sometimes you forget that, you know, painting is still your hobby and still like a form of therapy. And it's good to go back and do art for yourself in between of, you know, doing art for work...I've been trying to do that more recently where I won't post everything that I make...sometimes I just need to make art purely for the sake of making art without, you know, the pressure of oh, I need to, you know, post this at some point so I got to make it good and just kind of hav[e] a good time with it" (Josie).

In this quote, Josie defines art for oneself as something that exists outside the realm of work and therefore something that will not be posted about online and does not have the pressure of posting it online as a motivating (or demotivating) factor. These two kinds of art, art for oneself and art for work, parallel the difference between art and content. As was discussed in Chapter 3, artists experience alienation from their art when it becomes content/is posted online. This artist is making an effort to combat that by identifying art and time for art that will not result in alienation.

Relatedly, the importance of having creative hobbies outside of work was a topic several artists discussed in their videos.⁴⁶ Amy described in one of her YouTube videos that "I used to think of hobbies as a waste of time, when in reality it's such a good way to recharge yourself and get inspired again to feel the energy you have for your main passions...life isn't all about working and making money. It's nice to be able to give yourself some time in between work to do things that you just want to do" (Amy). Here, Amy describes hobbies as something that can help keep the creative juices for work flowing, so to speak, and therefore prevent burning out or art ruts. Significantly, the idea that hobbies are useful because they are helpful for work is a very neoliberal logic. In another example, both Vivienne and Gabriela regularly spoke about crochet in their YouTube videos, but neither of them sold any of their crochet items in their online shops (Vivienne, Gabriela). This is another example of setting a boundary between a creative hobby and work in an effort to spend time exploring one's creativity without producing art or content for work.

A final example I would like to bring up about setting boundaries between work and non-work is about personal relationships. In one of her YouTube videos, Vivienne spoke about a realization she had related to the purpose of her work. She shared that she felt "really really worn down" by her job and had an "epiphany" about it. She said, "if I take the steps to maximize my own joy, then I can have the capacity to maximize the joy and resilience and hope of my community, and my family and my loved ones. I feel like that is where I can make the most immediate, tangible, visible difference" (Vivienne). This quote shows a desire on this artist's part to reprioritize her personal relationships, including her relationship to herself. This exemplifies Jaffe's argument that work commonly takes priority over personal relationships today, and shows

⁴⁶ Refer to "A note on the literature: work, play, and hobbies" for more information on boundaries between hobbies and work.

an effort by an artist to combat that by redefining the "why" behind her job. Jaffe writes that "a side effect of all this love for work has been that talking about love between people has lost its importance...instead, our personal relationships are to be squeezed in around the edges, fitted into busy schedules, or sacrificed entirely to the demands of the workplace" (Jaffe 2021 326). This excerpt points to the way in which neoliberalism negatively impacts not only people's relationships to their work, but also their relationships with others. Vivienne's actions to try to limit this by reprioritizing her personal relationships and therefore setting a boundary with her work is an example of a solution for combating this. However, this solution remains an individual one and only affects the individual artist who implements it. In fact, all of the examples in this section about shifting and establishing boundaries remain on the level of the individual artist, again pointing to the entrenchment of neoliberal logics not only in narratives around self-employment, but also solutions for negative aspects of creative jobs.

Self-care

Artists also shared through their YouTube videos how they use self-care to cope with cons related to their work. The term or concept of self-care and how it has been commodified is complex and could be the subject of a much longer discussion than I am able to offer here. For the purposes of this section, I will simply refer to it as activities or tasks that a person does to benefit their health, reduce stress, and/or relax. Using this definition, it follows that these activities must differ depending on the individual in question, though I noted some similarities across the activities that these artists choose to do as part of their self-care throughout my research. For example, Lauren shared in one of her YouTube videos that "May was a really tough month for me, and I've just been really trying to slow down, take it super easy. I've had a lot of relaxing weekends...I've been crocheting, going on walks, hanging out with my cats, just

chilling on the couch - just being like super nice to myself and relaxing" (Lauren). In this example, Lauren references some pastimes that other artists also enjoy doing in their non-work hours. Vivienne and Gabriela also crochet, for instance (Vivienne, Gabriela). Lauren's quote additionally shows the importance of self-care activities in her burnout or general work exhaustion recovery process.

Relatedly, in one of her YouTube videos, Amy spoke about the value of looking after one's health. She said,

"investing [in] your health, whether it's mental health or physical health, is just as important as investing in your business. I've realized over the past, like, two and a half to three years of being self-employed that when you don't focus on your own health as a person, it makes your business struggle as well because if you're not sleeping well, if you're not eating well, if you're not, like, bathing yourself, you obviously are not gonna feel your best, and you're not going to want to do your best work...I just recommend eating at proper times, cooking yourself good healthy meals - a balanced well rounded meal, eat your fruits, eat your vitamins, make sure your posture is okay and you're not looking at the screen all day, hang out with your friends, have a good social life, take care of your mentals, maybe see a therapist if you need it, but yeah - that is, like, the ultimate thing that you can do for yourself is to make sure that you're healthy enough to continue working for yourself and building your own business" (Amy).

In this excerpt, Amy describes various self-care tactics that can help one be able to continue to face one's work. Significantly, these points that she makes about prioritizing one's health prioritize the business, rather than one's health. Implementing healthy habits for the sake of one's business rather than for one's own sake is another example of a specifically neoliberal logic.

Finally, I would like to point out that each of the solutions provided in the quotes above again only concern the individual artist and place the responsibility of coping with burnout and work-related precarity on their shoulders alone. The idea that self-care can adequately address these negative aspects of their jobs obscures the extent to which these negative aspects are purposeful results of the economic system in which the jobs exist, rather than defects with the

individual jobs (or the individual) themselves. As Hobart and Kneese write, "self-care is both a solution to and a symptom of the social deficits of late capitalism, evident, for example, in the way that remedies for hyperproductivity and the inevitable burnout that follows are commoditized in the form of specialized diets, therapies, gym memberships, and schedule management" (Hobart and Kneese 2020 2). They go on to explain that these commodified self-care strategies "allow individuals to practice forms of self-management embedded within neoliberal logics" (Hobart and Kneese 2020 4). Their use of the term "self-management" points to the uncompensated labor involved in the self-care and preparation for the next day of work that is expected of the individual worker under capitalism.

Hiring assistants

In her interview, Vivienne said that "there's no shame in asking for help, which is - which is probably one of the biggest lessons I've learned since being self employed" (Vivienne). She continued: "I have to recognize my limits as a person because ideally, this is something I want to do for a long time. And if I continue on the way that I'm doing, I'm going to be done in a year. Um, and so, I have hired a bookkeeper. I've hired an accountant, which was huge because finances, thinking about managing my finances literally makes me nauseous... And I am currently in the process of hiring, like, an admin assistant because I have really hard time with emails" (Vivienne). For this artist, hiring these people to help her with various aspects of her job that she struggled with or didn't enjoy was something that she felt could allow her to do her job sustainably for the long term. This is a sentiment that several other artists also expressed through their YouTube videos.

For instance, Lauren expressed interest in hiring an assistant in one of her videos (Lauren). Gabriela occasionally hired a friend to help her pack orders and Patreon rewards

(Gabriela). Bea and Mae both had assistants throughout the course of my research (Bea, Mae). Assistants were often hired to help specifically with "admin work," including emails and customer service, as well as packing orders. The reasoning for this is clearly explained by Amy. In one of her videos, she said that "whenever I have admin work or like things that I have to do in the back of my mind, it's very hard for me to let that go and just, like, sit down and draw even though that's, like, the only thing I want to do in that moment. And I just realized that, like, I have to get over that mindset because if I don't, I'm literally not gonna be creating, and I'm gonna just be replying emails all day and, like, replying to messages, you know, posting about these things, and I'm not even drawing anymore and that's, like, the whole point of why I'm alive" (Amy). Here, Amy describes how artists like herself juggle so many different obligations that actually finding time to draw or create art at all is a challenge. In other words, Mae said in one of her videos that "time is money and you cannot just be wasting time doing emails...I'm so glad I have Adam [her assistant] because, like, emails [are] not for me, like, I'm fine to actually do them, but if I had to do all of them, I'll be drowning. I would not be able to do anything else" (Mae). In this quote, Mae explains that if not for her assistant, she would be overwhelmed by her email and wouldn't be able to focus on other aspects of her work.

Hiring assistants often occurs as a response to previous experiences with burnout.⁴⁷ The idea behind this is that giving work to another person can help artists refrain from overworking themselves again, especially on tasks they do not enjoy.⁴⁸ Importantly, hiring an assistant to help with one's small business is again a solution to burnout that only affects the individual artist and

⁴⁷ While I did not collect data about how much assistants were paid by artists as part of my research, I did learn that some assistants only worked with the artists for a few hours a month, while at least one other worked with the artist as their full-time job. For more information about variation in artists' income levels, which impacts their ability to hire assistants, refer to the end of Chapter 3.

⁴⁸ Hiring assistants changes the role of the individual artist to that of an employer. While my data does not demonstrate the extent to which these assistants are exploited by their employers, it is important to question whether the freedoms discussed in Chapter 2 that artists experience are enabled because of the exploitation of someone else (i.e. an assistant).

their small business. Again, this kind of solution for burnout reflects the neoliberal value of the productive individual who is entirely responsible for their own success and survival.

Peer support

Finally, while I am arguing that artists' solutions for burnout and work-related stress that I noted throughout my research were on the whole individualistic, I do want to acknowledge a few of the occasions in which I saw peer support. For example, sometimes artists would engage in conversation with each other about burnout in their YouTube videos. In one of her videos, Bea described a perk of self-employment as "you get to pick what you're gonna do and how you're gonna do it" (Bea). Vivienne references this exact YouTube video in her own video, saying, "I was watching Bea's new video where she was talking about this idea that we are so lucky to be in a position where our jobs can be whatever we want them to be, which is something that I forget a lot because I have been locked into doing basically the same thing, virtually the same thing, for the last like almost five years. And I've been feeling really, really worn down by it all" (Vivienne). In this quote, Vivienne points to the control she perceives self-employment offers as a potential solution for feeling "worn down" by her work. In other words, she highlights being able to change her work as what will help prevent her from being "locked into doing basically the same thing," burnout, and feeling work-related fatigue. That these two artists were, in a sense, in conversation with each other with one affirming another's description of control as a solution for burnout, shows the extent to which this idea is shared in this "corner of the Internet."

In another example, Mae created a YouTube video in the format of a public service announcement for other artists. This was a commissioned work and dealt with the subjects of burnout and recovering from it. On her website, she wrote that "this short is an address of the taxing nature of being creative at a time where it feels like everyone is working non-stop, and my

own experience with creative block in 2017. The most important thing I learned after burning out and the basis for this short was that sometimes the solution to being able to create again is far from slugging it in the studio - it's to give yourself time to breathe, and to put space between yourself and your work" (Mae). While I have argued above that the solutions that she suggests here, including self-care and establishing boundaries around work, reflect neoliberal ideology in that they place the responsibility of addressing burnout on the individual, the format of this YouTube video also functions as a support for her peers. In other words, by addressing this video to other creatives, Mae appears to intend to help and provide advice to other artists. Ultimately, however, this is an example of an artist sharing individual strategies and solutions rather than an example of collective action. As a result, it too places the responsibility for avoiding burnout on the individual.

Additionally, I saw artists extending support for one another specifically related to loneliness, which, like burnout, gets in the way of their work. As Amy shared in one of her YouTube videos, "I've been pretty much working alone again for the past like two weeks now...I've just been in my office packing orders the whole time...I find myself just feeling very lonely again...sometimes that loneliness just makes me, like, it bothers me so much that I can't focus on working" (Amy). All of the artists I followed for this research identify as self-employed and never shared about being part of a union or organized collective with other illustrators. In fact, every artist I followed and/or interviewed worked alone or with one assistant to run their small businesses. This point is significant when considered alongside Jaffe's discussions about loneliness and relationships on the Internet. "People have tried to blame the Internet for our collective loneliness, but in fact it comes alongside the change in our working lives, the decline of unions and other institutions that gave people a sense of shared purpose and direction beyond

just the job" (Jaffe 2021 326). Therefore, it makes sense that loneliness on the job could occur as part of these artists' jobs; without coworkers, much less unions, having a collective "purpose and direction," as Jaffe writes, could be a challenge.

Artists sometimes addressed this challenge by connecting virtually with other artists who were similarly self-employed online. For example, Gabriela posted an Instagram Story about watching another artist's YouTube video to keep her company while she worked. Gabriela posted a picture of her desk with her desktop computer playing a Natasha Elle vlog with the text "@sadshrimps keepin me company while i work!! catching up on so many vlogs today" on her Instagram Stories (Gabriela). In this case, the artist used another artist's online content to help her feel less alone. While I am categorizing this as an example of peer support, it is also important to acknowledge that Gabriela sought out support through the other artist's video on her own, which is again an example of an individual solution to loneliness.

In sum, although there are some examples of artists extending support to each other and seeking support from each other, the solutions that they engage in to address burnout and other work-related cons only work on an individual level. The solutions I discussed in this chapter included changing work obligations, shifting or establishing boundaries around work, engaging in self-care, and hiring assistants. None of these solutions involved collective action, such as petitioning for algorithmic or other changes on the level of the social media platforms, engaging in public work-related discussions with various kinds of creators, or contacting platform administrations about how they impact artists and their work. Therefore, these solutions reflect the idea that addressing burnout and issues with work is an individual responsibility. This idea that if work is burning you out, you should work harder on self-care and work-life balance is a neoliberal logic and covers up the ways in which larger systemic forces, such as capitalism and

neoliberalism, as well as the social media platforms on which the artists post, greatly affect these artists' careers and contribute to their burnout. Ultimately, social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Patreon benefit not only from artists believing in neoliberal logics but also their efforts to solve burnout on their own. The lack of unionizing and collective resistance efforts allows these platforms to continue to profit at their expense.

However, this is not to say that these artists do not have agency and that the solutions they propose and implement do not benefit them. The control and independence they experience through their work as self-employed individuals, while limited, does allow them to, for example, work fewer days per week, capping the amount of work they do and therefore affecting the extent to which these larger forces impact their lives.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have drawn from interviews and digital ethnographic research conducted on YouTube and Instagram to argue the following: 1) The perceived perks of self-employment that artists publicly discuss on social media, such as control, freedom, independence, and others, are paradoxical because they are limited by the social media platforms on which the artists post. 2) The cons of self-employment artists experience, such as burnout, alienation, and precarity, are systemic issues, even though they are framed as personal problems on social media. 3) The various solutions to these cons that artists used throughout this project are individual, rather than collective. 4) It is in the interest of the social media platforms on which the artists post that they believe in paradoxical narratives surrounding self-employment, experience adverse work conditions, and pursue individualistic solutions to those conditions. These four points demonstrate the entrenchment of neoliberal ideology in contemporary discourse and illustrate the experience of artistic labor under conditions of neoliberalism.

The particular form of digital labor that I discuss in this thesis is emergent and exemplifies new trends in the framing of freedom and work, as well as increased precarity and dependence on algorithms. The historical moment that theoretical interlocutors I engage with, such as Harvey, were responding to is different than the one we are currently in, and this thesis attempts to address this by outlining the influence of neoliberalism on and through social media platforms today.

There are many additional aspects to this research topic that I would have liked to explore in both my research and analysis. For example, all of the artists I followed for this project identified as women, and I believe bringing both gender and race into the analysis would illuminate other dimensions of this topic. I also did not discuss the

physical toll of digital labor, such as back pain from doing admin work, or the democratization of art through social media, by which I mean widespread accessibility of relatively inexpensive artistic products through platforms like Instagram. Other aspects of this topic that would be interesting to cover in further detail include emotional labor, such as the management of emotions in YouTube videos, and the performance of authenticity, a state of realness or honesty in which one shares positive and negative experiences in their content and which makes them appear relatable to their viewers. Lastly, I think making analyses of the visual appearance of social media content, such as looking at color correcting or film editing, could highlight other aspects of the work involved in content creation.

A final suggestion for future research would be to focus on joy and community as they are fostered online by artists such as those featured in this project. One of the principal reasons that I began to watch some of these artists in my personal life five years ago was that their content and their art gave me peace, contentment, and happiness. I saw reflections of these sentiments in viewers' comments throughout my research. Although I did not bring this into the analysis presented in this thesis because artists' relationships with their viewers was not a central part of the project, I feel it is valuable to acknowledge that as an important takeaway from the research that points to the extent of the positive impact that these artists make on others through their work.

This morning, March 23, 2023, I read about how various creators on TikTok whose livelihoods depend on the app went to the Capitol to express the importance of it in advance of TikTok's CEO testifying before Congress (Kerr 2023). This current event, in which the future of a social media platform, and therefore the jobs of the

self-employed who use it are up in the air, speaks to the importance of considering social media as a contemporary workplace and the experiences of those who work on social media, from TikTok creators to the artists of this project.

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