GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON PLATFORMS AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION

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Introduction

While digital platforms have reconfigured the institutions and practices of cultural production around the globe, current research is dominated by studies that take as their reference point the Anglo-American world--and, to a lesser extent--China (Cunningham & Craig 2019; Kaye et al. 2021; Poell et al. 2021; Zhao 2019). Aside from totalizing theories of platform imperialism (Jin, 2013), the "rest of the world" has thus received relatively scant attention. Consequently, central concepts in the study of platform-based cultural production bear a strong imprint of Western institutions, infrastructures, industries, discourses, and cultural practices. US-based research, in particular, has informed how we understand and subsequently theorize notions of precarity, labor, governance, authenticity, gender, creativity, diversity, and autonomy in a platform environment. We can't simply *apply* these concepts to local cultures of production in other parts of the world. There is bound to be friction, as this panel will demonstrate, between how labor, precarity, and governance are understood in the Anglo-American world and the lived experiences of platform-dependent cultural labor in Latin America, Southern and Eastern Europe, and East Asia.

Concerns about Western-dominated research and theory are, of course, by no means novel. Post-colonial and decolonial theorists have long criticized the dominance and universalism of Western theory, pointing to the continuation of colonial knowledge-power relations (Chakrabarty 2009; Chen 2010; Escobar 2018). Moreover, there have been numerous calls to *decolonize* (Glück 2018; Willems & Mano 2016) and *de-westernize* (Curran & Park 2000; Khiabany 2003) media studies and, more recently, production and platform studies (Bouquillion 2023; Bulut 2022; Zhang & Chen 2022). That being said, in practice, the US and Western Europe continue to function as the primary and often sole frame of reference in research on platforms and cultural production. In the light of these concerns, this panel aims to contribute to efforts to: 1) challenge universalism, 2) "provincialize" the US, and 3) multiply our frames of reference in the study of platforms and cultural production. Such a conceptual undertaking is especially vital as the cultural industries are at the heart of societal processes of meaning making (Hesmondhalgh 2018) and market activity.

Let us unpack how the papers in this panel pursue this objective. The first paper develops a conceptual framework to expand our frames of reference for studying platforms and cultural production. Departing from epistemological universalism, it argues that

"platforms", "cultural production", and the "local" need to be studied as dynamic configurations, characterized by crucial *variations* and *correspondences* across the globe. That is, in contemporary instances of creating cultural content, transnational platform markets, infrastructures, governance frameworks, and cultural practices become entangled with local political economies and cultural practices.

Examining how such configurations take shape around the world, the next four papers in this panel focus on specific regions and modes of production, interrogating how local and transnational political economic relations and practices articulate each other. In this discussion, we pay specific attention to the notions of *precarity*, *governance*, and *imaginaries*.

The second paper reframes influencer precarity in a semi-peripheral context in the Balkans and emphasizes the relational basis of influencer agency, as influencers rely on family members and oft-mocked "Instagram husbands" to alleviate precarity. It thus offers insights into the local characteristics of algorithmic encounters with platforms by proposing the concept of *platform lethargy.* This concept speaks to an emotional response and deliberate refusal on the part of influencers to adapt to platform mandates. This refusal is rooted in algorithmic knowledge from the semi-periphery, where creators are cognizant of their position in a devalued platform market.

The third paper critically examines the intricate dynamics of creator culture, challenging the assumption of globally detached markets. Focusing on Latin American content creators in the United States, it explores how their aspirations intersect with the construction of the "Latin American" content creator dream. The study also scrutinizes the role of Content Service Organizations (CSOs) executives in shaping creator culture. Despite global portrayals, tensions emerge, revealing national market characteristics rooted in socio-cultural, linguistic, and regional norms.

The fourth paper examines how drama creatives, who work for streaming platforms, are globally connected and yet remain nationally restrained in terms of how they imagine work. Through the notion of *platform ambiguity*, the paper shows how streaming platforms negotiate with cultural producers by both enabling and restraining their work. Thus, it thus de-westernizes scholarship on platforms and cultural production by highlighting how drama makers are not only creative but also geopolitical subjects dependent on the state.

The last paper offers an alternative epistemological and ontological perspective on the state-platform-user configuration, where each actor works in alignment with others under the logic of governance. It uses a Chinese social media platform, Douyin, as a case to reveal how platforms rely on anthropomorphization to communicate with cultural producers and develop *playful governance* of China's political and cultural environment.

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STUDYING GLOBAL VARIATIONS AND CORRESPONDENCES IN PLATFORM-DEPENDENT CULTURAL PRODUCTION

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Introduction

This paper provides a conceptual framework to multiply our frames of reference in the study of platforms and cultural production. Pursuing this aim requires us to first challenge the often-implicit universalism structuring existing media and communication theories and concepts. The extant scholarship on platforms presents conceptual insights that, while novel, fail to reflect on the specificity of the socio-economic and political cultural contexts in which these insights have been developed. Whereas researchers that work on Asian, African, and Latin American countries often explicitly reflect on the specificity of the contexts they study, Anglo-American scholarship rarely provides such contextual exactitude. Hence, our starting point needs to be a commitment to questioning *where* and *how* central concepts in the study of platforms and cultural production have been developed and whether these concepts need to be rethought.

Second, and directly related, scholars of platforms and cultural production need to *provincialize* the Anglo-American world. Doing so means approaching the US or UK just as any other region, rather than as the frame of reference. To be sure, this does not imply that we must abandon the use of the concepts informed by Anglo-American scholarship. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009, 5) has made clear, reflecting on the imperialist European origins of ideas such as "the human or that of Reason", "there is no easy way of dispensing with these universals in the condition of political modernity. Without them there

would be no social science that addresses issues of modern social justice." Similarly, we cannot dispense with the concepts of precarity, governance, entrepreneurship, authenticity, and diversity in studies on platforms and cultural production, even though these concepts currently carry the imprint of US and Western European histories and concerns. Hence, we need to recognize the institutional and cultural baggage these concepts carry, while simultaneously enriching and complicating these notions through research from other parts of the world.

Third, enriching and complicating key concepts means *multiplying* our frames of reference. More detailed research is needed on the specific institutional settings, political economies, public infrastructures, and cultural practices in which platforms and cultural producers become entangled. Crucially, such research should not only be considered as "case studies," but simultaneously as opportunities for theory building. Why are Asian, African, Latin American, and Southern and Eastern European countries not key reference points? Even China is still often presented as exceptional, that is as a deviation from the US and Europe. Instead, as Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010, 212) maintains "societies in Asia can become each other's points of reference." Following, but also broadening Chen's proposal, we push to multiply our collective frames of reference, thereby enabling researchers to identify and conceptualize the correspondences and differences between processes of platformization across the globe.

To be clear, these efforts to challenge Western universalism and diversify the geographies of theory cannot be the work of Asian, Latin American, or African scholars alone. We cannot multiply our frames of reference if dominant Western academic institutions and leading networks of scholars do not explicitly *and* critically reflect on the specific contexts in which theory is produced. The conceptual playing field needs to be leveled for different theoretical frames to appear as *equal options*, rather than as alternatives to universal Western theory (Mignolo 2012).

Differences and Correspondences

The starting point to multiply our frames of reference are postcolonial and decolonial critiques of modernity. Research in these traditions has demonstrated how modernity and coloniality are inextricably connected (Chakrabarty 2009; Escobar 2018; Mignolo 2012). This understanding has implications for how we discuss differences and correspondences in the evolution of platforms and cultural production. Clearly discussing these differences and correspondences in terms of "modern and traditional", "developed and underdeveloped", "first and third world", "the West and the Rest" marks a continuation of the colonial order. And while the now- commonly used notions of "Global South versus Global North" have been developed with an emancipatory/activist agenda in mind, in practice, these concepts are also often employed as placeholders for older, problematic categories. That is to say, these all-encompassing categories do not do justice to the wide variety in institutional and cultural configurations around the world.

Hence, more specificity is needed to describe and analyze regional and local configurations. However, as Maitra and Chow (2016) have pointed out in their reflections on Asia and new media, an emphasis on "place" does carry the danger of cultural essentialism, leading researchers to overlook *differences* within "apparently

homogeneous spaces," as well as to ignore the many economic, infrastructural, political, and cultural *connections* that develop across geographic boundaries (Ibid.,18). In the light of these concerns, the authors (Ibid., 20) call for the development of more critical "transnational perspectives on the localization of digital habits and habitats". Following this call, we propose to systematically trace how platform-dependent cultural production through transnational platforms, as well as their associated cultural practices, become entangled with local institutions and modes of production.

Negotiations

To ground this analysis, we draw on Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy's (2021) framework to analyze platform-dependent cultural production. This *generic* framework has explicitly been developed to facilitate research on different types of cultural production in different parts of the world (Ibid. 197-200). Building on this work, the challenge is, first, to examine how platform governance, markets, infrastructures, and practices become entwined with local and national political economies and practices. Hence, we understand platformization neither as a top-down process directed by transnational platform companies, nor as bottom-up, shaped by local actors and practices. Instead, platformization is a process of *negotiations*, which unfold within specific spatial configurations. The particular geographies, actors, institutions, and practices that define such configurations vary from case to case.

This leads us to the second challenge: conceptualizing the character and consequences of the platformization of cultural production from a wider variety of perspectives. The aim is to use the research on platforms and cultural producers in regions in Asia, Africa, Latin American, and Eastern and Southern Europe as an opportunity for *theory building*. Consider the notion of "precarity." Within research on platforms and cultural production, this concept emerged as a consequence of the experiences of independent creative workers in the US, Canada, and UK (Duffy 2017; Glatt 2021; O'Meara 2019). While there is the recognition that precarious labor has a long history (McRobbie, 2016; Neff et al., 2005), platformization is also said to further undermine job security in the cultural industries (Deuze & Prenger 2019; Poell et al. 2021). Crucially, these perspectives on precarity have been challenged by recent research on Ghana, rural China, and Slovenia, as discussed in the second paper in this panel (Alacovska et al. 2021; Lin & de Kloet 2019). In these regions, "precarity is not a deviation from the norm but a constant and longstanding feature" (Alacovska et al. 2021, 619). In such economic conditions, platforms do not necessarily intensify precarity, but enable "marginalized individuals" to become "unlikely creative workers" (Lin & de Kloet 2019, 10). While such platform-based work is also precarious, it provides opportunities to those with few other options. Thus, in the light of research on other parts of the world, we are prompted to revisit the conceptualization of precarity. It is precisely these kinds of empirical and conceptual conversations that we aim to facilitate.

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PLATFORM LETHARGY: INFLUENCER PRECARITY IN THE HUSTLING CULTURE

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With social media influencing entering its second decade, there is a growing body of literature that sheds light on the *precarious* nature of this work. Research connects the issue of influencer precarity to platform governance and investigates the lived experiences of being governed by algorithmic systems. Additionally, this literature provides insights into the agency of workers amidst precarity, such as through the exchange of algorithmic gossip (Bishop, 2019) and the formation of engagement pods (O'Meara, 2019) within influencer communities. Furthermore, studies underscore the significance of influencers maintaining relationships with their audiences, wherein intimacy serves as a strategic tool to foster relations with followers (Abidin, 2016; Baym, 2018; Glatt, 2023). While these studies offer valuable insights, they have a limited scope in understanding the interplay of influencers' precarity and agency as they overlook how social networks and pre-existing local constellations shape precarity (Waite, 2009; Qadri, 2021). The aim of this study is to examine how influencers in Slovenia establish agency amid precarious working conditions on and off platforms, shedding light on the reproductive resources available to workers beyond platforms.

This study draws on the theoretical framework of *relational work* from economic sociology. Viviana Zelizer (2012) introduced this concept as a response to the common belief that the realms of economy and intimacy are inherently separate and at odds with each other. Instead, Zelizer argues that they are intertwined and mutually constitutive. People manage this commingling of economy and intimacy through relational work, an ongoing process of defining, strengthening and dissolving social ties through economic transactions. The basic unit of analysis of relational work is the relational package. It consists of a meaningful social tie (spouse, friend), an economic transaction (wage, barter, gift), and the medium of exchange (money, vouchers, coupons). A cursory glance at influencers' content indicates that they are masters of integrating the realms of economy and intimacy. They incorporate their families into their content and collaborate with male partners, commonly referred to as "Instagram husbands" (Lorenz, 2023). However, there remains a gap in understanding the dynamics of these behind-the-scenes relationships and how they might shape worker agency beyond the scope of social media platforms.

Methods

In order to get insights into these intimate relations and examine how influencers in Slovenia gain agency under precarious working conditions, the study draws on over 50 in-depth semi-structured interviews with influencers, their social ties, and agency and brand representatives. Moreover, the study involved participation in industry conferences and events. Slovenia is a state in the Balkans with a population of 2 million people. It provides a compelling context for examining influencer precarity because more general precarious working and living conditions have existed here at least since the end of feudalism. In response, a specific Balkan hustling culture has emerged in which people make a living through multiple income streams from the formal and informal economy,

rely on family members and moonlighting. The reliance on family and informal economy is similar to economies in Africa, Latin America, and large parts of Asia. However, there is also a socialist legacy of stable employment, worker protection, and a welfare state similar to the Scandinavian model (Jaklič et al., 2009).

Platform Lethargy

The findings reveal that influencers in Slovenia do not gain agency through platform-centered practices as demonstrated in the existing literature. Instead, they use platform features with minimal effort across the cycle of cultural production that spans content creation, distribution and monetisation, a phenomenon I would like to call "platform lethargy". This notion draws from the concept of Hu's (2022) digital lethargy to describe affect of being passive and avoiding decisions in the context of digital capitalism that requires active, empowered and expressive personhood. Platform lethargy encompasses both an emotional response and a deliberate refusal to adapt to platform mandates and to establish, maintain and cater to platform-mediated relationships. Platform lethargy as an emotional response and an act of refusal is rooted in a specific algorithmic knowledge (Cotter, 2022). It originates in the semi-periphery where complementors are cognisant of their position in a devalued market for platforms and hence believe they lack agency. Platform lethargy is evident in not keeping up with content trends, producing mediocre-quality content, not seeking visibility on platforms through engagement pods or algorithmic gossip, neglecting monetisation metrics, forgetting about having YouTube AdSense and minimally engaging with followers by merely liking comments without responding, or even ignoring comments altogether. The concept of platform lethargy illustrates how human interactions and responses to algorithms play out in spaces beyond the Anglo-American world, exposing the algorithmic flaws and frictions caused by contextually inappropriate, or in this case, irrelevant design.

Instead of conforming to and interacting with platforms, influencers in Slovenia gain agency by having multiple income streams and relying on the help of family members and intimate partners. Regardless of their success on social media platforms, influencers have diversified income streams through standard employment, working on other platforms, welfare state, running a business, consulting and dropshipping goods. Moonlighting is present as the primary job often interferes with influencing. Influencers invent creative and hidden payment systems like family members' companies, PayPal, and UpWork. Transactions also take the form of non-monetised market exchange as influencers are often paid in kind with vouchers, vitamins, or barter promotion on social media for dental service discounts. They treat influencer income as a "nice to have" rather than a "must have", to elevate material standard of living.

In these various hustles, Instagram husbands and other family members play an important role. They invest in an influencer's business, help with content creation, manage finances and provide equipment. There are cases where a boyfriend or mother becomes an employee when the influencer grows their brand. In return, influencers employ a wide range of techniques to match economic transactions and media of exchange with intimate ties: they gift, barter, pay and bribe with myriad exchange media such as money, vouchers, subscriptions, and sex. There are also gender differences as female influencers engaged in watchful performance of relational work by earmarking

money from influencing for common use with their partners like paying for holidays, weddings or groceries. They earmark influencer income in such a way that it functions as "pin" money which historically refers to supplementary household income earned by women that was deemed more frivolous than that of their male partners reproducing patriarchal dynamics within households (Zelizer, 2011).

In summary, influencers in Slovenia gain agency through diverse income streams and the support of intimate partners and family members. Precarity is alleviated not by using intimacy as a tool to establish relations with followers but by relational work that connects the actual intimate relationships with economic transactions. By mapping collective hustles and collaborative practices between influencers and their household members, this study shows how precarity is refracted through the local economy and culture. Finally, it offers insight into how the business model of social media platforms on the periphery is piggybacked on exploiting the local conditions of social reproduction, with platforms having plugged into pre-existing regimes of accumulation (Piletić, 2023). This study is germane to the de-westernisation of platformized cultural production studies and highlights much missed varieties in platform capitalism.

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LIVING MY LATIN AMERICAN CREATOR DREAM: INTERROGATING THE SOCIO-MATERIAL ILLOGICS OF CREATOR CULTURES

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This paper critically examines the intricate dynamics of creator culture, challenging the prevailing notion of globally detached markets (Florida, 2022). It investigates the experiences of Latin American content creators in the United States, illuminating how their aspirations intersect with the construction of the "Latin American" content creator dream. Simultaneously, it scrutinizes the active role of Content Service Organizations (CSOs) executives in shaping the creator culture. Despite market imaginaries portraying a global scope, tensions emerge, revealing predominantly national market characteristics and limitations rooted in socio-cultural, linguistic, and regional norms. Framed within creator culture literature, social media imaginaries, and media industry practices, the research incorporates 20 in-depth interviews with CSO and platform executives and Latin American creators. By dissecting these processes, the article contributes to unraveling the spatial and material logics influencing creator cultures and shaping value dynamics in the broader configuration of creator markets (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021; Cunningham & Craig, 2021; Zelizer, 2011).

The creator economy has been described as the "economic, social, and professional ecosystem that creators work in" (Florida, 2022). According to different reports, the market size of creator economies is valued at US$100 billion, where "more than 300 million people across nine large nations posted their creative content online in 2022" (Florida, 2022). Latin American content creators, notably gaining recognition in the U.S., contribute to this economy, reaching global audiences from their home countries or post-migration. However, economic rewards are unevenly distributed, with a small percentage earning substantial incomes. The literature emphasizes that despite the quantitative contributions of the creator economy, it tends to overlook socio-cultural logics, which become apparent when exploring the interplay of discourses and practices that imbue content creation with cultural significance (Abidin, 2016; Du Gay & Pryke, 2002; Duffy, 2017; García-Rapp, 2017; Hund, 2023). The concept of creator culture is introduced, highlighting the cultural and economic exchanges within this rapidly evolving sector, driven by social media entrepreneurs who leverage global-reaching platforms to create both cultural and commercial value (Cunningham and Craig, 2021). Economic sociologist Viviana Zelizer characterizes the social arrangements regarding economic life as "circuits of commerce" (2011). In the context of content creators, these commerce circuits are formed by entities such as branding agencies, brands, followers, and social media platforms (Arriagada and Ibáñez, 2020). In this article, we explore how Latin American creators pursue the 'creator dream' in the U.S. as they engage with 'circuits of commerce' alongside other actors, such as creator service organizations (CSOs). We also examine the cultural distinctions they bring to shape this market, for instance, in the form of social imaginaries.

Methods

This study employed in-depth interviews (N=20) with executives from Creator Services Organizations (CSOs) and content creators based in Los Angeles. Informed by prior studies (Abidin & Ots, 2016; Bishop, 2019; Duffy, 2017; Hund & McGuigan, 2019), the questions aimed to explore how interviewees define their activities, characterize the attributes of Latin American content creators and their audiences, understand value creation within their practices, and delve into various topics such as backgrounds, expertise, content creation processes, content distribution and promotion, payment systems, relationships with brands and CSOs, as well as relationships with other Latin American content creators. Interviews with CSOs executives addressed topics like the attributes of Latin American creators, and their audiences, as well as payment and contractual aspects of working with creators. Applying grounded theory, transcripts were analyzed iteratively, constructing a hierarchical framework of categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1969).

Results

Stakeholders in LATAM creator culture, including platforms, creators, and creator service professionals, contribute to diverse perspectives, shaping imagined opportunities for LATAM creators in the U.S. CSO professionals perceive LATAM Creature Culture as an untapped market, emphasizing its appeal to cord-cutting audiences. However, distinctions in how LATAM creators operate on global platforms are often overlooked. CSO executives struggle to differentiate the market within U.S. borders, blending markers of identity and location. The presumptive access LATAM creators have to a unified U.S. LATAM cultural market is explored, along with CSO executives attributing imagined powers to platforms, guided by socio-technological mechanisms. The study notes challenges in adopting successful strategies amid a cultural reckoning in the U.S., exemplified by the Black Lives Matter and Me-Too movements, impacting minority representation in advertising, and briefly boosting LATAM creators' brand deals. The sustainability of these conditions remains an area for further investigation.

The trajectory of LATAM creators migrating to the U.S. presents complex dynamics. Pursuing their Latin-American dreams, they may initially align with aspirational labor but later grapple with the impact of traditional media incentives on their cultural identity. For creators, relocating to the U.S. becomes a career pattern to access larger markets. Language becomes a crucial factor, with Spanglish adapting to diverse audience expectations, leading to tensions with both audiences and advertising agencies. Bilingualism becomes an authenticity measure for LATAM creators, influencing brands' interest and complicating content adaptation. The aspiration to reach broader audiences in the U.S. drives LATAM creators, creating a nuanced interplay of commercial, social, and platform relations.

Latin American content creators engage in a multifaceted socio-technical ecosystem, navigating intricate commercial relationships with brands, platforms, and influencer marketing agencies (Arriagada, 2021; Bishop, 2021; Christin & Lu, 2023; Colucci & Pedroni, 2022). The "circuits of commerce" involve continual negotiation, with influencers

facing challenges in monetization due to factors like geographic audience distribution and algorithmic dynamics (Kopf, 2020). Bilingualism becomes an authenticity measure, impacting creators' strategies to appeal to diverse markets (Christin & Lu, 2023). Influencer marketing agencies vet influencers based on AI-driven demographic analysis, focusing on languages and diverse audience demographics (Christin & Lu, 2023). Creators express a shared sense of helplessness regarding aspects beyond their control, emphasizing their commitment to quality content creation amid challenges. The interplay of numerical evaluations, algorithmic influence, and collaborative strategies shapes the landscape where creators navigate digital challenges and opportunities.

In sum, the examination of Latin American content creators in the U.S. and their interactions with Content Service Organizations (CSOs) executives reveals intricate dynamics in shaping creator culture. This study contributes insights into the interplay of social and material dimensions within diasporic creator cultures. Tensions arise from the clash between global aspirations and the retention of national characteristics, highlighting the paradox within ostensibly global markets. CSO executives perceive LATAM creators through a standardized lens, emphasizing a singular U.S.-based market opportunity. Creators grapple with linguistic and cultural challenges, striving for authenticity amid blurred representations. The industry's imaginaries shape power dynamics, impacting creators' entrepreneurial identities and dreams. LATAM creators navigate platforms and CSOs, contending with conditions beyond their control, emphasizing the need for future research on migrant creators assimilating into broader commerce circuits.

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PLATFORM AMBIGUITY AND PRECARIOUS CREATIVITY IN AUTHORITARIAN TURKEY'S DRAMA INDUSTRY

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When streamed on BluTV, Turkey's first subscription-based platform, the national hit *Masum* (*Innocent*, 2017) sparked positive imaginaries about platforms' potential in a censored media environment. Drama makers imagined that platforms would liberate creative workers from the political pressures of heavy regulation and state censorship. The shows' star actors Haluk Bilginer and Serkan Keskin were particularly hopeful about the future of television production for platforms. "One of the goals in productions for streaming platforms is to be free from censorship and some rules," said Bilginer (Gence, 2017). His colleague Serkan Keskin stated that many young directors and authors would be able to dream more freely.

To a certain extent, some of these hopes have become real. In less than a decade, national and global streaming platforms operating in Turkey (BluTV, Netflix, Gain, Exxen, Disney+) produced several shows, some of which (e.g. *Kulup/The Club, Yedi Yuz/7 Faces, Bir Baskadir/Ethos*) have stood apart in terms of their aesthetic quality and political content. Yet, contrary to the widespread belief that platforms would be immune to censorship, state intervention has persisted across streaming platforms. Specifically, with the regulation passed in 2019, streaming platforms now must pay licensing fees to the state and remove content upon requests from the government. Netflix has even canceled the production of *If Only* (*Si lo hubiera sabido*) and decided to produce it in Spain because the Turkish government was reported to unofficially disapprove a gay character in the story. As if these were not enough, in 2023, Radio and Television Supreme Council issued monetary fines to Netflix, Disney+, and BluTV for violating the "national and moral values" and streaming productions that were against the "Turkish family structure" (Birgun, 2023).

Thus, although drama creatives' employment opportunities and global outreach have expanded, their *creative freedom* has not enjoyed a similar growth. In fact, because of the commercial mandate to produce content in a global market and the persistence of state regulations, drama creatives' positive imaginaries have in time become more ambivalent to the extent that some even call them "dumpsters" (Uysal, 2020). Yet, such criticism does not immediately bring withdrawal or refusal. That is, these creatives have not given up on platforms. They either overlook or work around platformized censorship and keep collaborating with platforms, hoping to make their work nationally and globally visible.

Approach

In examining these shifting imaginaries shaping Turkish drama production, I follow Marc Steinberg's (Steinberg, 2019) emphasis on the hybrid business model that facilitates financial transactions, and define corporate entities like Netflix as a platform, running on the distinct business model of paying a flat fee in licensing content and running through subscriptions. I focus on platform imaginaries in Turkey's authoritarian context and ask:

How do we interpret the ways in which Turkish drama creatives' imaginaries have fluctuated from a moment of "dreaming more freely" back in 2017 to regarding platforms as censored spaces of creative "dumpsters" in a few years? What do these shifting imaginaries in authoritarian contexts tell us about platforms and their power over cultural production?

In responding these questions through ethnographic research across four sets, writers' rooms, industrial and governmental summits, and interviews with more than 60 creative professionals, I draw on the notion of "platform imaginary," which refers to "the ways in which social actors understand and organize their activities in relation to platform algorithms, interfaces, data infrastructures, moderation procedures, business models, user practices, and audiences" (van Es & Poell, 2020, p. 3).

Platform Ambiguity

In my research, on the one hand, I found that Turkey's drama creatives enjoyed the geographical expansions and cultural connections enabled by platforms. On the other hand, however, these creatives have been politically restrained because of platforms' compliance with the state's regulatory framework since 2019. Thus, in making sense of their work, creative professionals overlooked, worked around, negotiated, and contextually criticized censorship across platforms, while still seeking visibility for their work. In sum, ambiguity was at the core of creatives' platform imaginaries, which all depended on the state.

Considering how the metaphor of platform itself both obfuscates and reveals (Gillespie, 2010), I introduce platform ambiguity to show that imaginaries within drama production are ambiguous and never static, requiring us to consider the state's improvisation capacity with respect to media regulation and the enforcement of cultural norms in creative production (Larson, 2022; Zhang & Chen, 2022). The state has always shaped cultural production in traditional television and film industries (Punathambekar, 2013) and continues to do so by regulating streaming platforms, which tend to give the impression that they are beyond the nation states' influence. However, as the case of Netflix and *The Patriot Act* in Saudi Arabia reveals, nation-states and platforms have developed a "symbiotic relationship" through which the state implements targeted censorship while the platform abides by controlled compliance (Khalil & Zayani, 2021). In this relationship, the nation state needs platform companies for legitimacy because banning platforms altogether would damage nation branding. But platforms also need the state for their businesses, which strictly implies how cultural producers' platform dependence is mediated by the state.

Thus, we cannot fully understand "platform-dependence" (Poell et al., 2022; van Es & Poell, 2020) and platform imaginaries (Bucher, 2017) without considering the state and pre-digital forms (Ngoshi, 2021). Put simply, cultural producers and their imaginaries are not only *platform-dependent* but also *state-dependent*.

Analyses of platforms should not be limited to only technological questions because platforms are dynamic in political terms, as well. When a writer works on his/her next drama, s/he considers more than the complex and contested interactions between a

specific platform and the broader industry because his/her work will inevitably depend on national regulatory frameworks. If workers are dependent not only on platforms but also the state, the implications are major: drama producers are not only creative subjects but also geopolitical subjects, operating within pre-digital production norms and practices (Larson, 2022, p. 4). As subjects embedded in national settings, these creative people would then constantly negotiate their work with prevalent socio-cultural norms and regulations concerning what is politically allowed for creative production. Similarly, the legal securing and violation of creative workers' socio-economic rights are both embedded within national contexts regulated by the state.

The conceptual expansion of "platform imaginary" by recentring the state and highlighting ambiguity matters because it allows for theoretically connecting platform power and creative work in relation to the political question of freedom. Ambiguity enables grasping platform power's enabling and restraining dimensions *not as opposed but interwoven.* We thus transcend the dualistic perception of platforms as *either* emancipatory *or* oppressive spaces. With platform ambiguity, we perceive creative workers' imaginaries in terms of control *and* freedom rather than control *or* freedom (Sopranzetti, 2017). Due to the ambiguous blending of freedoms and constraints, creative drama workers feel liberated as they make global connections but still simultaneously feel nationally restrained.

Overall, the emphasis on the state, censorship practices, and ambiguity in understanding imaginaries contributes to dewesternizing platforms and conceiving platformized cultural production outside Euro-American contexts (Alacovska and Gill, 2019; Author; Davis and Xiao, 2021). Far from being universal and uniform, platform imaginaries are always embedded in national contexts and informed by contestations between producers and the state, where the former struggles to make their work visible under authoritarian conditions.

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DOUYIN'S PLAYFUL PLATFORM GOVERNANCE: PLATFORM'S SELF-REGULATION AND CONTENT CREATORS' PEER-SURVEILLANCE

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Social media platforms often claim to be neutral in their role as aggregators who connect content creators and end-users, justifying their infrastructural or algorithmic changes as providing better services (Gillespie, 2018a). In stark contrast with Western platforms' efforts to position themselves as neutral conduits, Chinese social media platforms appear to blatantly admit and showcase human intervention in the process of content regulation and moderation. One of the most prominent social media platforms in China, Douyin, for instance, has created a 平台官方账号 (platform official account), namely, 抖音安全中心 (Douyin Safety Centre, henceforth DSC). Through DSC, Douyin regularly announces its updated rules and policies in alignment with state's regulatory actions. Other Chinese social media platforms, including Kuaishou, also created similar platform official accounts. These accounts anthropomorphize platforms, enabling platforms to represent their regulatory bodies with fictional human characters or animated figures. These accounts are part of a contemporary trend of brands and entities increasingly engaging with personification as a tactic to interact with other users on social media (Sligh and Abidin, 2022). Yet, in this research, we focus on how platform official accounts enact communicative and discursive functions that allow platforms to discipline content creators through *anthropomorphization*.

This phenomenon of *platform anthropomorphization* in the Chinese social media landscape stems from a different ontological understanding of platform governance in China. The first part of this research discusses the realities of platform governance in China, and highlights a different state-platform-user relationship in comparison to the U.S and European countries. In the second part, we turn to focus on Douyin as a case study to further investigate how Chinese social media platforms establish and promote their own rules and policies and govern content creators.

China's state-platform-user configuration

When it comes to the topic of platform governance, scholarship often focuses on 'governance of platforms', viewing platforms as private companies whose conduct is informed by local, national, and supranational laws and policies (Gillespie, 2018b; Gorwa, 2019). From this perspective, the Chinese governance of platforms is characterized as

direct and top-down, whereas the U.S and Europe are characterized by a self-governance approach (Helberger et al., 2018; Stockmann, 2023). Another strand of platform governance scholarship attends to 'governance by platforms', focusing on how platforms actively take up the role of 'governor' to police the activities of content creators and users (Gillespie, 2018b). These two sets of governance relationships—between governments and platforms, and between platforms and users—are often discussed separately.

However, there is an urgent need to reflect on the interconnectedness between legal regime, platforms, and users. Platform governance in the Chinese context, therefore, serves as an opportunity to adjust the epistemological and ontological thinking of the state-platform-user relationship. In this research, we argue that the state-platform-user configuration in China is far beyond the simplified premise where the Chinese state enacts direct censorship and control. Instead of solely looking at the state's role, we need to pay attention to how Chinese social media platforms developed in the context of omnipresent government regulation, and how they can expand our thinking about platforms and cultural production more generally (Davis and Xiao, 2021; de Kloet, et al. 2019).

We examine the state-platform-user configuration with Zhou's (2022) theorization of the institutional logic of governance in China. Zhou (2022, p. 9) suggests that the coexistence of arbitrary power by central authority and the bureaucratic power based on administrative positions, rules, and procedures is fundamental to the formation of an institutional logic of governance in China. In regards to platform governance, the central government and Cyberspace Administration of China holds arbitrary power in determining internet regulation (Miao and Lei, 2016), but secondary multifacet regulatory agencies often act with conflicting interests (Shen, 2016; Miao et al. 2021). Meanwhile, platform companies are granted autonomy and rights to develop informal practices and patronage ties to implement state policies or tame undesirable behaviors of users. Hence, state-platform-users form a configuration in which the relationships are in constant shift between tight-coupling and loose-coupling, resembling Zhou's (2022, p.105) model of 'principal-supervisor-agent relations' as a result of governance.

Douyin as a Case Study: Towards a Mechanism of Playful Governance

Understanding how social media platforms respond to and incorporate legal command into their decision-making process remains a challenge for researchers and policymakers. This research takes Douyin, a popular social media platform in China, as a case study to examine how social media platforms rely on anthropomorphization to playfully and skilfully enact governance. For this inquiry, a thematic analysis of four Douyin's public-facing policy documents that set up rules for users and content creators was conducted. Following this analysis, we collected 132 short videos posted by the platform official account, and conducted a discourse analysis on the selected materials.

By reading Douyin's policy documents, we argue that Douyin discursively set up an approach that prioritizes controlling content creators over the administration of data/content. Governing content creators is not a way to force content creators to do what the platform wants, but establishes, what Foucault (1993) called a subtle integration of the structures of coercion into the techniques of the self. This strategy to co-opt creators

to behave according to its regulations is further amplified by the platform official account (DSC) which anthropomorphizes the public facing policy documents. Since June 2021, DSC has posted a series of content that playfully reveals the work of human content moderators, and later another series featuring a fictional character Mei Loufeng as an embodiment of the platform. The homonym of the name Mei Loufeng (means Mr. Not-forgetting-to-ban-any-account). He dresses as a 捕快 (captor), which is a police-officer-like figure in ancient Chinese society in most of the posted short-videos. DSC created playful videos with Mei Loufeng and organized livestreaming inspections to interact with wanghong creators. It relies on trends or wanghong creators' fame to generate visibility for the platform's rules and social norms. The interactions with DSC, in turn, grant creators a certain degree of visibility and legitimacy. Hence, creators willingly partake in participatory surveillance, feeling a sense of autonomy and empowerment legitimised by the platform (Chen and Yang, 2023). In this process, creators conduct themselves to produce desirable outcomes for the platform, turning themselves into the subject of governance.

In short, Douyin relies on anthropomorphization to achieve communicative and discursive function for regulation. This process forms a *playful governance* mechanism, which helps the platform deliver legal and moral commands to content creators and prompts self-disciplinary content creation. The goal of being playful is twofold. First, it 'connotes a light-hearted tone and something that is intended for amusement rather than to be taken seriously', marking the autotelic characteristic of content circulating on Douyin (Chen et al., 2021, p. 111). When enacting regulation, DSC created content that is imbued with this playful culture to please the content creator community. Secondly, it softens Douyin's political intentions into light-hearted episodes of social incidents, and helps the platform to dissolve users/citizens' creative manoeuvers against rules (Xie et al. 2021; Zidani, 2018). In this way, the platform controls political risks in a playful manner.

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