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Beyond fans: The relational labor and communication practices of creators on Patreon

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Abstract

The digital patronage model provides content creators the opportunity to receive sustained financial support directly from their fans. Patreon is a popular digital patronage platform that represents a prime site for the study of creators' relational labor with their fans. Through in-depth interviews with 2 Patreon creators, this study investigated different types of creator–patron relationships and the perceived benefits and challenges of carrying out relational labor. We found that creators construct a variety of relationships with patrons, ranging from purely transactional to intimately familial. Creators benefit from relational labor in that it encourages patrons to treat the creator as a person rather than a product, resulting in both financial and emotional support. However, creators face difficulties in maintaining appropriate relational boundaries with patrons, some of whom control a substantial part of a creator's income.

Keywords

Creative labor, crowdfunding, digital patronage, financial support, Patreon, social support

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Introduction

A growing number of platforms, such as Twitch, Patreon, and OnlyFans, enable fans to purchase subscriptions to their favorite content creators in exchange for small perks and privileges. This phenomenon of people being able to provide direct, and often recurring, financial support to content creators through transactional social systems is called digital patronage (Wohn et al., 2019). Digital patronage not only creates exciting new monetary and social opportunities for creators but also introduces the burden of patron management and relational labor (Baym, 2018). Moreover, engaging with patrons spans a variety of communication styles, including mass communication, interpersonal, and *masspersonal*—that is, communication which is highly personalized yet publicly available (French and Bazarova, 2017; O' Sullivan and Carr, 2018). The juxtaposition of these layers of computer-mediated communication means that creators must navigate the complexity of managing different types of "audiences" without a comprehensive understanding of the person they are communicating with (Marwick and boyd, 2010; Wohn and Freeman, 2020).

In this study, we interviewed 21 creators on the digital platform Patreon to investigate their relational management of patrons and, in particular, the positive and negative aspects of relational labor. Understanding how digital patronage platforms facilitate financial support of content creators is important because digital patronage represents an alternative to business models based on advertisements or sponsorships; these models require a large audience and are not viable business models for small or niche content creators (Bonifacio and Wohn, 2020; Wohn et al., 2019).

Related work

Relational labor in creative work

Relationships have always played a key role in securing long-term financial security among creative workers. Historically, these relationships were limited to the artist-community or the artist-wealthy patron dynamic (Alacovska, 2019; Baym, 2018); in the case of musicians and other well-known creators, fans were handled by formal management (Craig and Cunningham, 2019). Now, however, digital creators are expected to personally foster intimate, long-term relationships with their audiences through the practice of relational labor (Baym, 2018; Craig and Cunningham, 2019; Davidson and Poor, 2015). Creators perform relational labor when they communicate with their fans in a purposeful and sustained manner intended to cultivate an intimate creator–fan relationship and, ultimately, to secure financial support (Baym, 2018; Craig and Cunningham, 2019). Relational labor encompasses multiple levels of communication, from mass communication (e.g. designing a Patreon page) to group-level interaction (e.g. moderating a community Discord server) to dyadic interaction (e.g. personalizing a thank-you letter for a top contributing patron), and it typically extends across several digital platforms. Craig and Cunningham (2019) estimate that digital creators spend as much as 50% of their time

on managing their audience—despite the fact that creators are not directly compensated for this labor, nor are future returns on this labor assured.

Baym (2018) argues that relational labor is unique to the digital context of creative work. It is the always-connected nature of digital technology, and especially social media, that heightens fans' expectations of creators. Fans now demand constant accessibility and intimate self-disclosure from their beloved creators, treating creators more like friends than celebrities. Creators' satisfaction of these demands underlie relational labor, which Baym (2018) formally defines as "the ongoing, interactive, affective, material, and cognitive work of communicating with people over time to create structures that can support continued work" (p. 19).

Relational labor is simultaneously authentic and commercial: although creators must appeal to fans' demands for intimacy, their ultimate goal is to obtain financial support. Although relational labor can lead to meaningful relationships, more often the financial dependence of a creator on their fans prevents the development of a genuine relationship between equals. Relationships grounded in relational labor are "inherently utilitarian" (p. 176) (Baym, 2018) and operate by different rules and expectations than a mutual friendship, despite a creator's projections of intimacy. Indeed, boundary creation and maintenance can be one of the most stressful parts of relational labor, especially for introverts (Davidson and Poor, 2015; Guarriello, 2019). Intimate self-disclosure to a mass audience of strangers online can, understandably, be daunting; so too can the uncertainty of knowing how much to disclose, and even how often to post or by what norms on constantly evolving social media platforms (Craig and Cunningham, 2019; Duffy, 2017; Neff et al., 2005; Scolere, 2019).

The practice of relational labor is exemplified by research on microcelebrities. First coined by Senft (2008) in her studies of camgirls, a microcelebrity is a content creator whose success relies on an intimate connection to a small but passionate fanbase (see also Jerslev, 2016). In direct contrast to mainstream celebrities, who maintain distant public personas, microcelebrities achieve success through a transgressive disclosure of the personal self (Raun, 2018). Previous studies have explored microcelebrities' strategic practices of intimacy on Twitter (Arvidsson et al., 2015; Marwick and boyd, 2011), Instagram (Duguay, 2019), and YouTube (Dekavalla, 2020; Jerslev, 2016; Raun, 2018; Universitat and Roca-Cuberes, 2017), where microcelebrities regularly disclose sensitive information, such as sexual experiences and footage of their bedrooms, and encourage an intimate connection with fans through expressions of vulnerability, such as crying on camera (see also Berryman and Kavka, 2018). These practices fall under the umbrella of relational labor, as they are purposeful acts of communication intended to connect with audience members, with the end goal of maintaining an audience and earning money.

Another key component of microcelebrities' relational labor is self-branding. Microcelebrities maintain a consistent visual and verbal aesthetic in order to brand their content—but self-branding encompasses more than just content (Senft, 2008). It extends to self-presentation, in that microcelebrities are expected to align all facets of their online identity, including casual communication with both fans and strangers, with their self-brand (Khamis et al., 2016). Thus, relational labor includes acts of emotional regulation, such as surface-acting, to ensure that all interactions fit within a creator's established

brand (Davidson and Poor, 2015). The constant pressure to conform to one's self-brand, and fans' ceaseless surveillance thereof, led Marwick to declare that microcelebrity is "something one *does*, rather than something one *is*" (Marwick, 2015).

Microcelebrities usually perform relational labor to maintain a large audience, through which income is *indirectly* generated via advertising, brand sponsorship, and so forth. In contrast, creators on digital patronage platforms are performing for fans who directly pay the creator. This labor may even take place in a synchronous setting like a livestream, where fans can tip additional money in direct approval of a creator's behavior. Such an environment places additional demands on a creator to regulate their emotions, spontaneously disclose to their audience, and negotiate boundaries live (Guarriello, 2019; Wohn and Freeman, 2020).

Creators who utilize the digital patronage model may sell their self-image as microcelebrities do, or sell a product of their creation. However, this is not a clean division. Some creators share the bulk of their work for free (e.g. by posting on YouTube, Twitter) or have hybrid content distribution practices that involve both exclusive and free content. When it comes to financing through digital patronage, creators may offer patrons access to additional creative work, but just as frequently they offer social rewards that derive their value from the assumption that fans want to be more intimate with the creator—such as access to the creator's daily journal or a private community on Discord (Hair, 2021). In this way, creators come to bundle themselves and their creative work together and market both as valuable to their fans (Hair, 2021).

Digital patronage

Digital patronage refers to the act of sustained financial support to a content creator as a form of appreciation for their work; it occurs within sociotechnical systems that support financial exchange in addition to creative expression (Wohn et al., 2019). Popular digital patronage platforms include Twitch, a livestreaming platform, OnlyFans, a membership platform focused on adult content, and Patreon, an arts-based membership platform (Bonifacio and Wohn, 2020). Other major digital players have also adopted elements of patronage: Facebook, for example, already offers monthly subscriptions for its "Creators" (Bonifacio and Wohn, 2020), and Twitter intends to implement "Super Follower" subscriptions soon (Needleman, 2021). Indeed, digital patronage is part of a larger corporate shift toward subscriptions and away from advertisement-based revenue, exemplified by the business models of Netflix, Pandora, and the New York Times (Gilbreath, 2017).

Digital patronage can also be seen as a unique type of crowdfunding, as it emphasizes recurring payments toward a *person*, rather than one-time donations for a discrete *project* (Bonifacio and Wohn, 2020; Regner, 2020). Early crowdfunding research often focused on campaign factors influencing success, such as campaign language and network size (e.g. Belleflamme et al., 2014; Hui et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2014). Subsequent research has explored crowdfunding campaigners' labor, both during and after a campaign, and found a significant portion to be relational in nature (Davidson and Poor, 2015; Galuszka and Brzozowska, 2016; Hunter, 2016; Smith, 2015). For example, campaigners need to encourage funders' investment in the project without sacrificing creative autonomy: engaging with and satisfying fans without handing over creative

control demands considerable relational labor (Scott, 2015; Smith, 2015). In addition, although project-based crowdfunding has the nominal goal of funding a single project, most campaigners wish to convert their one-time funders into long-term community members, who will continue to engage with the project after its release and to support future projects (Galuszka and Brzozowska, 2016; Smith, 2015).

In this regard, digital patronage and crowdfunding share the common goal of long-term fan retention via relational labor, a task which comprises a major portion of creators' everyday labor (Baym, 2018; Craig and Cunningham, 2019). But digital patronage differs from other types of crowdfunding in that it formalizes and monetizes these long-term creator-fan relationships through recurrent subscriptions. Digital patronage creators are directly and regularly compensated for releasing updates, works-in progress, and additional content, whereas crowdfunding campaigners are expected to do so as part of their (unpaid) community engagement efforts (Craig and Cunningham, 2019).

Digital patronage supports many types of content creators, including writers, artists, video game streamers, independent journalists, microcelebrities, political commentators, and musicians (Patreon, 2020; Regner, 2020). While most content creators are not able to make a comfortable living from digital patronage alone (Knepper, 2017; Regner, 2020), it represents an attractive alternative revenue model, particularly for small or niche creators. In the past, creative workers have often relied on freelance, project-based work for their primary—but precarious—source of income (Alacovska, 2019). In contrast, recurrent digital patronage offers the potential for greater stability, as well as an opportunity for creators to better know the people who are supporting their work (Bonifacio and Wohn, 2020; Manjoo, 2017).

In research on Twitch, a major digital patronage platform (Wohn et al., 2019), found that people have varying reasons for why they give money: some see patronage as a means of purchasing content that they find interesting or useful, while others desire to help a content creator who may be financially struggling. The range of patronage motivations, from utilitarian and transactional to emotional and irrational, demonstrates that no patron is the same. What this suggests is that creators have to deal with a myriad of different expectations and motivations of patrons. For those patrons who pay to receive or view content, the creator must make sure they are regularly producing content. For those patrons who desire more intimate relationships and emotional involvement with the creator, the creator must engage in communication and other methods of personal interaction. This phenomenon makes modern-day digital patronage very different from traditional patronage (McLean, 2007), where a creator has a small number of benefactors whom they have to please. For contemporary creators, patron management goes beyond dyadic and small group interactions and into the realm of relational labor with a mass audience.

Patreon

Launched in 2013, Patreon is one of the most popular patronage platforms (Manjoo, 2017). As of January 2021, the site has nearly 200,000 creators with 11 million subscribers (excluding hidden pledges) (Graphtreon, 2020). The estimated monthly payouts come to $22.4 million, and this is only based on data of creators who make their earnings

public. Patreon has seen exceptional growth: 5 years ago, there were only 1 million patrons pledging $5.7 million (Graphtreon, 2020). Patreon appeals to creators because it is easy to create an account and earn money even with a small following, as Patreon does not require a minimum audience threshold in contrast to Twitch and YouTube's partnership policies (Manjoo, 2017). This has made Patreon an important income source for marginalized groups—people who lack the social capital to "make it" through traditional business models—and has been described as an "incubator" for niche subcultures that may not have mass appeal, but do have a dedicated supporter base (Bonifacio and Wohn, 2020; Manjoo, 2017).

On Patreon, creators set up a profile and offer different subscription options for supporters, from as low as one dollar up to hundreds or thousands per month (Patreon, 2020). Some subscriptions do not offer any benefits, but others (especially popular ones) provide a variety of creator-decided perks, such as access to exclusive content, communication opportunities with the creator, and publicly displayed acknowledgements. This is common across digital patronage platforms, which, much like crowdfunding platforms, typically offer some kind of reward in exchange for a subscription (Bonifacio and Wohn, 2020; Wohn et al., 2019). However, rewards should not be seen as purely transactional, in the sense that supporters do not typically expect to receive an item or service that is commensurate with their payment. Rather, the money patrons give to creators falls somewhere between a no-strings-attached donation and payment for services received (Wohn et al., 2019).

As mentioned above, Patreon creators often advertise access to their creative work *and* access to themselves as equally valuable to fans (Hair, 2021). When creators introduce intimacy into digital patronage, it is natural for fans to reciprocate in kind. Indeed, research on Twitch subscriptions indicates that a fan's subscription—nominally a form of financial support—can take on an intimate, socio-emotional dimension (Sjoblom and Hamari, 2016; Wohn et al., 2018, 2019).

Thus, Patreon subscriptions do not appear to be purely economic: they are a multidimensional type of support that both transform and are transformed by the social relationship between creator and patron. In economic sociology, the "connected lives" school of thought argues that in fact *all* financial transactions bear social meaning, as the economic and social spheres of society are inextricably co-constituted (Zelizer, 2005, 2011). People use financial transactions every day to manage relational ties by forming "good matches" between type of payment and type of relationship—efforts that Zelizer (2005, 2011) refers to as *relational work*. For example, in the United States, friends typically do not compensate favors with money, as such a payment would violate the cultural expectations of their relationship. But other forms of non-monetary payment are acceptable, such as buying a friend pizza in exchange for helping with a move.

In the past, subscriptions could have been viewed as fairly impersonal transactions between consumers and large, faceless providers. But when the provider gains a face, as is the case with fans subscribing directly to a creator on Patreon, subscriptions become relationally charged interactions. Indeed, previous research has found that artists on Patreon actively employ relational work to frame subscriptions as caring support between friends, rather than cold economic transactions, in an effort to establish long-term relationships with patrons (Hair, 2021).

The current study builds on research documenting the importance of relational ties in crowdfunding and digital patronage and takes Patreon as a case study of the latter. This study identifies the tasks, demands, and benefits of relational labor to the context of creators on digital patronage platforms, many of whom also utilize the social media platforms frequented by microcelebrities and the synchronous environments described above. Because of this, Patreon creators' experiences with relational labor extend across a multitude of digital contexts. The burden of relational labor can be exacerbated for aspiring (Duffy, 2017) and freelancing (Alacovska, 2019) creators, who lack an established audience that will eventually compensate the creator for their labor. Thus, this study's sample of creators included both seasoned creators and relatively new aspirants; we also sought out creators with prior experience in different revenue models (e.g. video monetization, freelance commissions, direct sales).

Specifically, this study asked:

RQ1: What relationship dynamics exist between creators and patrons?

RQ2: What positive aspects of relational labor do creators encounter on Patreon?

RQ3: What negative aspects of relational labor do creators encounter on Patreon?

Methodology

Recruitment and protocol

Interview recruitment involved three stages. First, we sampled general Patreon users from Graphtreon, an unofficial database of Patreon creators (Graphtreon, 2020). To gain a diverse sample, we sampled the top five, middle ten, and bottom five creators from 28 content categories, which resulted in interviews with 14 participants who responded to our inquiry. Because the majority of interview participants were White, we conducted a second stage of recruitment for creators of color by targeting relevant hashtags and communities, which resulted in four additional interviews. Finally, we recruited from Graphtreon categories not represented by current participants, such as dance and theater, animation, and adult content. This stage resulted in three additional interviews. In total, we sent recruitment messages to 390 creators and conducted 21 interviews.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted over the phone and through online videoconferencing software. The interviews were conducted by the first and third authors, as well as four research assistants. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour and entailed questions about creators' interaction and memorable experiences with patrons. The interview protocol was reviewed and approved by the IRB. Participants were given a $50 gift card.

Participants

Of the 21 participants, 14 identified as White, 3 as Asian, 1 as Hispanic, 1 as Black, and 2 as mixed race (Asian and White, and Black and Asian). Nine participants identified as

Table 1. Demographic information of interviewees.

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Race	No. of patrons[a]	Type of content	Location
P	Male	72	White	5	Drawing & Painting	US
P2	Male	29	White	265	Games	US
P3	Male	3	White		Podcasts	Switzerland
P4	Male	34	Asian	Unknown	Video	US
P5	Female	29	White	776	Cosplay	US
P6	No gender	25	White	Unknown	Adult Drawing	US
P7	Female	42	White	725	Drawing & Painting	US
P8	Female	29	White	3992	Writing	US
P9	Female	32	White	6	Music	US
P 0	Female	24	White	397	Adult Video	Hong Kong
P	Female	26	White	5	Adult Photography	US
P 2	Male	24	White	Unknown	Podcasts	US
P 3	Female	30	White	28	Magazine	US
P 4	Trans Female	9	Asian/ White	6	Drawing & Painting	US
P 5	Male	30	Hispanic	7	Adult Drawing	US
P 6	Trans Female	33	Black/ Asian	0	Writing	South Korea
P 7	Nonbinary	23	Black	34	Writing	US
P 8	Female	24	Asian	49	Games	US
P 9	Male	32	White	58	Adult Writing	UK
P20	Male	39	White	080	Comics	US
P2	Female	22	White	589	Animation	US

[a]As of 23 July 2020.

female, eight as male, two as transgender female, one as nonbinary, and one reported having no gender. Most participants ranged from between 19 and 42 years old, with 72 as an outlier. A majority lived in the United States ($n=17$), with others living in South Korea, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland. Table 1 presents detailed demographics.

Analysis

The research team conducted an in-depth, iterative analysis of the data to understand how relational labor unfolds on Patreon. First, the interviews were transcribed through Temi, an automated transcription service, and manually corrected by researchers. The researchers then employed structural coding to organize the large amounts of data (Namey et al., 2008). In structural coding, questions and associated responses are

organized into "conceptual domain[s] of inquiry" (such as "Patron Loyalty" and "Engagement with Other Creators" in the present study) to enable more efficient and precise analysis across researchers (Namey et al., 2008).

The researchers selected domains relevant to relational labor and independently read through and annotated participant responses associated with each domain. Using these independent annotations, the researchers met and collaboratively identified themes within and across participants' responses. The researchers then engaged in iterative discussions to clarify and substantiate each theme and, finally, grouped together key quotes based on these themes.

Results

Patron-creator dynamics

RQ1 sought to understand patron-creator dynamics. We found that creators view their relationship with these patrons in different ways: some maintain a purely transactional relationship (creators receive payment from patrons and in turn deliver content to them), whereas other creators develop intimate relationships that approach friendship. Some patrons are colleagues and friends the creator knew prior to their pledges, while others become friends after pledging.

Purely transactional relationship. For some creators, their relationship with patrons is purely transactional. It is a simple exchange of give and take, in which patrons pledge to the creator and the creator delivers content. P19, a writer, viewed any intimate relationship with his patrons to be nonexistent. He explained, "They read my books and pay for them," and that was the extent of their relationship. Although creators such as P19 are not as emotionally invested in patrons, these creators still feel gratitude toward them. P14, a digital artist, had one patron who had pledged to her Patreon since the beginning of her account. She described their relationship as, "They support me, and I work and they give me money. That's really the most basic thing. I don't really think it's more complicated than that . . . I'm thankful for them."

Friendly relationship. Other creators report an emotional investment in their relationship with patrons. Some creators had befriended patrons before pledging; they usually came from the same communities, such as a geographically local community or a fandom. Other creators befriend patrons after they pledge. Loyal patrons, who can pledge for years, tend to interact with the creator on social media more than general fans, which facilitates the bonding process. For example, P20, a webcomic artist, has a "friendly" relationship with his patron who pledged to his $100 a month tier for 5 years. He interacts with this patron on a monthly basis to play the RPG (role-playing game) that is a part of the rewards of his $100 tier. Despite this regular interaction, the artist differentiated between genuine friendships and his "friendly" relationship with patrons: "I have not really had any [patrons] graduate to sort of relationship like friendships . . . but I have some very friendly relationships with a lot of them."

P13, an environmental journalist, knew her loyal patrons before they pledged because her patrons live in the same geographical area as her. In a similar vein, P17, a blogger, knew most of their loyal patrons beforehand because they shared the same fandom communities. P17 explained, "[Some] were online friends and became patrons or became patrons and then we became online friends," indicating that intimate relationships can develop in either direction.

At the most intimate extreme was P15, a digital artist who had a patron who pledged to his highest tier "since the beginning." He stated, "We're best friends. We talk about everything." P15 cherishes patrons like him, viewing them as "family," as they helped him financially and emotionally during the hardships in his life. He expresses deep gratitude, intimacy, and caring toward his patrons:

> Other creators . . . just see patrons as ATMs . . . I can both neither see them or afford to treat them that way. My life, my literal life depends on them. So I don't do it just because my life depends on [them], it's because I want to be a good person. Just sheer human decency there. Those people, those subscribers, those patrons care. They care for my content and they care for me as a person. They want this. They see me as an artist who's growing . . . trying to carve a niche for himself.

Top patrons. Some creators can pinpoint who among their loyal patrons is their "top" patron. This top patron either gives the largest monetary contribution or interacts the most with the creator—or sometimes both—and this patron's dedication produces a unique relationship between them and the creator.

For P15, a number of socially and financially intimate relationships coalesce into one: he considers his longest-standing and highest-paying patron to also be his best friend. Likewise, P17's top patron fulfills both financial and social roles. Their top patron is their highest-paying patron, but also serves as their mentor. P17 explained that they tend not to have much engagement with their patrons, but this patron was unique in that she "took [me] under her wing." This patron is a professor who studied and wrote about fandom communities, similar to P17's content and interests. P17 stated that this patron helped them become "a better scholar and writer."

P5, a cosplayer, considers her highest-paying patron to be her top patron and her "favorite." This patron paired financial support with emotionally meaningful moments and social interaction. When P5 has "a birthday or like a fundraiser, he always sends additional money then. And he also leaves like the nicest comments on the planet."

However, some creators do not recognize any patrons to be their top patron because they do not want to favor a single patron above the others or give them special treatment. This is usually done as an act of fairness for their patron audience. P18 managed a large Discord server where members play a role-playing game. Because of the nature of how Patreon rewards directly impact the game everyone on the server plays, she avoided specifying a single top patron so as to maintain a fair game: "I try not to play favorites within them because it can cause a lot of unnecessary drama."

Positive aspects of relational labor

RQ2 investigated the positive aspects of the relational labor that Patreon creators perform. Creators report a range of benefits from their relational labor, including feedback on content, emotional support, financial support, and intimacy. Creators especially highlight patrons who give additional financial support without the expectation of reward.

Feedback on content. Creators often receive feedback from patrons about their content, largely positive. This feedback usually comes in the form of comments on the creator's posted content or a direct message. For example, P13 runs an online nonprofit organization. A patron who was a well-known figure in P13's local community wrote a positive recommendation of the organization on Facebook, and his reputation contributed to legitimacy and respect for the organization's work.

P7 creates painting tutorial videos on her Patreon, and her patrons often share their thoughts about the videos. P7 values the positive feedback she receives about her teaching methods, especially when a patron tells her that her tutorials helped them learn how to create art they did not know how to do before. She stated that it is motivating "to realize you're making a difference in somebody's [life]." P8, a manager for a blog site, noted that even constructive criticism can be a positive experience. She found that this kind of feedback is "the most fulfilling," because when P8 responds to the criticism from these patrons, they react in a respectful manner and were glad she and her team considered their opinions.

Emotionally supportive patrons. Sometimes, creators take a break from creating Patreon rewards or decrease the rate of content output, either to recuperate from personal issues or simply make reward creation more manageable and sustainable. Creators report positive experiences with patrons who respond to the news in an understanding and sympathetic manner.

P5, a cosplayer, had "over-committed" and became emotionally distressed due to the difficulty of fulfilling her patron rewards. When she posted news of reducing the rewards, she feared her patrons would be upset. Instead, her patrons were "so kind and so understanding and very reassuring," and said they did not want to receive those rewards if it meant she would feel very stressed. P9, a music composer and pianist, had to take a break from content creation due to health issues. Her patrons responded with support and encouraged her to "take care of [herself]." They continued their pledges even when she was not posting anything new during her break and awaited her return.

Monetary support without expectation of reward. Patrons provide monetary support to creators due to the financial nature of the Patreon platform. However, in the same way that patrons can offer emotional support to creators, they can also provide monetary support without expecting a reward in exchange, often when the creator announces they are experiencing financial hardship or personal difficulties. P17, a blogger, shared on their Patreon that they were looking for writing work in order to buy tickets to a BTS concert. A patron donated $75 upon learning this. P17 asked the patron if she wanted writing

work done in return, but the patron turned down the offer. Similarly, P15, a digital artist, recalled how his patrons helped him to pay fees for an emergency situation:

> One of them just randomly gave me $100. And they say like, "Hey, I know you're going through . . . I think this will help." And I was extremely grateful. I actually teared up when he said that and he meant a lot cause he didn't expect anything in return. He was just doing this out of the goodness of his heart.

P18 is an admin of a large Discord server where hundreds of members play the role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons. She recalled how a patron suddenly pledged $1000 for 1 month, even when the patron was not rich; she knew they worked two jobs and had to manage several health conditions. She stated that although the patron did not outright say they did not want a reward, they simply did not claim their rewards.

Interactive engagement with creator. Creators report positive engagement with their communities that extends well beyond content. Engagement often involves playing games with each other, sharing memes, or talking about their personal lives, and often occurs in private Discord servers. P16, an author of an illustrated webnovel, frequently interacts with patrons on her server. She discusses the story and characters with her patrons in a small, close-knit community, in which she and her patrons also bond with one another through memes and self-disclosure. Creators also enjoy the fact that their community is like-minded; this is especially true for niche content creators. P4, a creator who posts videos that focuses on spirituality and meditation, appreciates that his patrons could relate to him and his content emotionally.

As discussed in the previous section, creators and patrons can form deep and genuine connections that transcend a transactional setting. P14, a young transgender woman, befriended a patron who opened up to her for advice on gender identity and dysphoria. P14 greatly valued this intimate experience: "[It] was kind of a sweet moment that I remember that they looked up to me for that kind of wisdom or advice."

Negative aspects of relational labor

RQ3 investigated the negative aspects of relational labor that Patreon creators perform for their audience. These negative aspects stem from a sense of patron entitlement and include misconduct in the community, overstepping boundaries, leaking exclusive content, and disagreement with creators.

Patron misconduct within the community. Certain patrons may stir controversy and cause tension in the community, again often in a private Discord server. Behavior deemed inappropriate by the creator and community may result in the patron's expulsion from the community or heavier moderation. P2, who runs a company that produces videos and podcasts discussing video games, described a persistently contentious patron who attempted to push his beliefs onto other community members. The community's disinterest and discouragement drove the patron off the Discord server. Sometimes the community will not only face disagreements from a patron, but outright harassment. P18 recalls

how some high-paying patrons used their status to "to try to gain leverage over other members" and sexually harassed others within her community's Discord server. P18 states "Although I was losing a bit of substantial income [from the patrons], I had to ban them cause that was the right thing to do."

Rather than ousting a patron, a creator may opt for a less severe punishment: heavier moderation. A creator may also choose to do this if they already have a personal relationship with the patron. According to P16, one of her friends is a patron that frequently gets into disagreements with the other patrons and fans on P16's Discord server. P16 states she must monitor "her interactions with the others [on the server] to make sure no one accidentally offends her."

Patron overstepping boundaries. Sometimes patrons overestimate what kind of relationship they have with a creator. For example, they perceive the creator to be a friend or available for romantic pursuits and feel entitled to the creator's attention because they give the creator money. Patrons may overstep boundaries by stalking the creator on social media, creating inappropriate sexual content of the creator, or even trying to doxx the creator.

P14, a young transgender woman, had a high-paying patron who stalked her across every social media platform she used, despite her efforts to block him. She struggled to reconcile the stalker's financial support of her with her own safety: "I couldn't really just hope to ignore him . . . I knew that he was still supporting my Patreon [and] I can't really turn down the extra money." P21, a creator of animated autobiographical videos, reported that some patrons had drawn offensively sexual fanart of her. She also encountered patrons who are strangers that attempt to befriend her in an inappropriate and "childish" manner:

> [They are] putting a lot of expectations on me and saying like, "I've never had a friend before and I want you to be my friend." And it's like, I can't answer this because I'm in a position of power and I just, it feels bad. In a more extreme case, P21 explained that some patrons even tried to discover where she lives through several doxxing attempts, though none have succeeded.

Leaked Patreon content. Creators also report patrons posting Patreon-exclusive content on other platforms for others to view for free. Creators then lose potential revenue and spend extra time and money to prevent their content from being leaked. P7, an artist who created Patreon-exclusive painting tutorial videos, stated that she had to remove her videos on YouTube and move them to Vimeo, which costs several hundred dollars a year, for stronger privacy and anti-leak settings. P10 used her Patreon as a personal blog to voice her private thoughts and experiences that she did not want posted publicly and to discourage "people who are not my loyal fans [to] know about [her] insecurities." She did not focus on making money on the platform, instead using it as a way to limit who can read her "more private or personal posts." However, someone leaked her photos and posts from Patreon. She decided to limit the number of patrons who could pledge to her Patreon to 20 people in order to discourage leaks.

Disagreements with creator. Patrons may also clash directly with the creator themselves, often about political or moral issues. P20, a webcomic artist, recalled a patron who

canceled their pledge and left a "nasty" message on the exit poll revealing why: a character in P20's webcomic was revealed to be gay, and he vehemently disagreed with that. P17 described a more severe experience of harassment and cyberbullying. As a blogger, they wrote critiques of popular media and racism in fandom culture. The Patreon-exclusive critiques were suddenly leaked to Tumblr, which led to severe harassment from members of certain fandoms. P17 concluded that there were patrons pledging to their Patreon in order to seek out controversial content, stating, "I don't understand why anyone would pay money to harass me."

Discussion

Digital patronage represents a new, advertisement-free revenue model for creators. Successful digital patronage relies on devoted fans who are willing to offer long-term, stable support to a creator—primarily financial support, but often social and emotional as well. Due to the emphasis on long-term, blended support relationships, relational labor is a key component of digital patronage.

This study revealed the strong presence of relational labor among Patreon creators. Relational labor goes beyond the practice of regularly communicating with fans; it concerns the cultivation and management of relationships within the context of financial support (Baym, 2018). Creators expressed a range of creator–fan relationships, from strictly transactional, with the creator having little-to-no emotional investment in their patrons, to a strong family-like bond, in which patrons are not only a monetary lifeline for a creator, but an emotional and social one as well.

The majority of creators, however, were conscious of and vocal about the differences between their distant relationships with a non-paying audience, their financially grounded relationships with their patrons, and their close relationships with family and friends. Returning to Zelizer's (2005, 2011) notion of a "good match," we found that creators performed relational work to determine the appropriate type of payment for patrons—something less intimate than was due to family and friends, but more intimate than was provided to ordinary fans (see also, Hair, 2021). This process of negotiation manifested as stress about how much or what type of content they ought to release in order to fairly compensate patrons, and, more perniciously, as a reluctance to sever their relationship with abusive but high-paying patrons.

Boundary-drawing is a key dimension of relational labor, as it is boundaries that demarcate different types of relationships. All digital users must manage their online self-presentation and willingness to disclose (Karr-Wisniewski et al., 2011; Stutzman and Hartzog, 2012), but for creators, disclosure and vulnerability become job requirements (Craig and Cunningham, 2019; Guarriello, 2019). Popular creators have always had to cope with overly adoring fans and stalkers, but social media—with its wealth of archived information and its potential for intimately direct creator-fan communication—has served as accelerant to the flames (Baym, 2018; Litt and Hargittai, 2016). These unclear boundaries may also be a direct outcome of masspersonal interactions (O'Sullivan and Carr, 2018), as the distance that one normally expects in a broadcaster–audience relationship is blended with interpersonal interactions that some of these platforms facilitate.

Digital patronage models further exacerbate this situation, as Patreon creators (or a team of creators) are in sole control of their own revenue. Creators have no management team to act as a buffer between themselves and their aggressive fans. In addition, creators rely on their fans directly for income. They cannot ban a fan from their community and still expect the fan to contribute money through advertisements, purchase of merchandise, and so on. One creator laid out this conflict explicitly, with a stalker who followed her across every social media platform. Despite severe harassment, the creator concluded that she could not afford to block him and lose his financial support. The central role of intimacy in the digital patronage model can endanger creators when they feel obligated to compromise their safety or integrity in order to maintain a relationship with abusive patrons.

Conversely, our interviews highlighted the benefits of conducting relational labor. Relational labor is undeniably work, and it is undeniably founded on commercial goals. Despite this, successful relational labor can be "rewarding and pleasurable" for all involved, especially for creators who thrive on interaction with their fans (Baym, 2018). It is worth highlighting that none of the creators expressed concerns about being a "sell-out" or felt that their creative work was compromised or limited by patrons' financial contributions. It is likely that relational labor assuages these concerns: creators feel that they are receiving support from people who care about their work, rather than being commissioned to churn out a specific product (Hair, 2021). In this way, digital patronage is differentiated from historical models of patronage, in which a single wealthy patron might affect an artist's work.

Indeed, creators regularly mentioned patrons' non-financial contributions. Patreon was founded on financial grounds, with the belief that creative workers should be fairly and regularly compensated (Conte, 2017), rather than forced into poverty or "bread-winning" jobs with art as an unpaid hobby (Abril and Plant, 2016). But digital patronage, and its emphasis on long-term relationships, enables patrons to move beyond financial payments and into a mixed model of support that blends financial, social, and emotional contributions. For example, several creators related incidents in which their patrons contributed extra money without expectation of anything in return. Typically, these gifts were prompted by the creator's self-disclosure, such as it being their birthday or that they were struggling with health issues. In one case, when a creator had to take a hiatus from posting content, her patrons posted supportive messages and continued to pledge their subscriptions, highlighting the blended financial-social nature of these relationships.

This finding corresponds to the "connected lives" perspective (Zelizer, 2005, 2011), in that the initially transactional nature of the creator–patron relationship does not impede the development of social ties. At first glance, patrons may seem like customers who pay an impersonal subscription fee, but our interviews demonstrated otherwise. Unlike customers, many patrons are emotionally invested in creators and feel socially close to them. When that closeness increases, and the relationship becomes friendly, then friendly payments like birthday gifts and medical donations become an acceptable part of the exchange (Zelizer, 2005, 2011).

Creators also benefited from patrons' ongoing encouragement and feedback, especially in the creative development phase between long projects such as albums and

novels (Baym, 2018). Without relational labor, creators would be deprived of this level of intimate care and support from fans.

Our findings align with research on digital patronage in other contexts, particularly video game livestreaming. On Twitch, a major livestreaming platform, paid subscriptions are uniquely driven by social motivations (Sjoblom and Hamari, 2016), and studies have found that the strength of the parasocial relationship between livestreamer and viewer is positively linked to enjoyment (Wulf et al., 2018) and to financial, emotional, and instrumental support of a streamer (Wohn et al., 2018). Qualitative work (e.g. Guarriello, 2019) also suggests that a streamer's skill in relational labor has a strong impact on their popularity, financial success, and the loyalty and emotional investment of their fans.

The medium of interaction differs significantly between Patreon creators and video game livestreamers, in that communication between Patreon creators and their patrons often occurs asynchronously or through text (although some creators did also livestream). Despite the difference in medium and in content, robust long-term relationships clearly remain key to digital patronage. Guarriello's (2019) remark that "[by] being attentive, grateful, and friendly along with being transparent about one's financial situation, there are long-lasting, sustained forms of income and emotional support [that occur] outside of a one-time donation" applies equally well to the contexts of video game livestreaming and creative work on Patreon.

However, Patreon creators feel that there is a lack of community-building and patron engagement infrastructure on the platform itself. Patreon essentially only acts as a tool for creators to facilitate a content subscription service and content distribution, not offering much in patron engagement besides commenting on posts and direct messaging. Patreon is seemingly aware of its limited communication system. This is evidenced by its partnership with Discord, a messaging and community platform, that offers Discord Integration to creators as patron rewards. Many creators expressed their reliance on Discord, as it is extremely difficult to solely use Patreon and achieve a comparable level of discussion and engagement with an audience.

Limitations

The study is limited to users of Patreon. However, Patreon creators communicated with their patrons on multiple platforms, thus extending our findings to some extent to the broader digital landscape. It should be noted that the majority of participants used Patreon as a secondary source of income; creators who use it as a primary source may view and interact with their patrons differently. In addition, although we strove to recruit a diverse sample in terms of gender, race, and ethnicity, most participants were based in the United States.

Conclusion

Creators employ relational labor to manage multifaceted, financially grounded yet intimate relationships with their patrons, and in particular to draw boundaries between themselves and overstepping patrons. This study demonstrates the applicability of the

relational labor framework to creative workers in a digital patronage context. Future research should apply the framework to additional contexts, such as the upcoming digital patronage platform OnlyFans, or Facebook and YouTube, which have added patronage features in a limited capacity. Future studies should also draw out the nuances of which creators succeed at relational labor and why, as this study's sample was biased toward mid- and low-performing creators. Creators' personalities (Davidson and Poor, 2015) and patrons' motivations are fertile grounds for analysis of relational success.

Finally, relational labor as a concept needs further development from a communication theory perspective. One potential avenue of exploration concerns the hybrid nature of interactions that is somehow simultaneously interpersonal, mass communication, and masspersonal (French and Bazarova, 2017; O'Sullivan and Carr, 2018; Walther, 2017). Numerous variables have been proposed to differentiate masspersonal from other forms of communication, including the personalization and perceived accessibility of a message (O'Sullivan and Carr, 2018) and its intended audience (Walther, 2017). Such variables are clearly relevant to the paywall-gated, "VIP" culture of relationship-building through digital patronage. However, digital patronage also involves interactions that are inherently interpersonal (e.g. direct messaging with fans) as well as mass communication (e.g. broadcasting a pre-recorded video). Future studies may want to distinguish these variables when deconstructing creators' relational labor.

Despite the financial basis of the creator–patron relationship, creators derive emotionally meaningful experiences from patrons, which can influence the creator's content and their mental health. In this regard, although relational labor is taxing, it provides returns to creators above and beyond a simple revenue stream. Future research should continue to investigate the stresses and benefits of relational labor and digital patronage in order to provide healthy, beneficial digital spaces for creative work.

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